The SLEEPWALKERS

HERMANN BROCH

"One of the greatest European novels." —Milan Kundera

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The
SLEEPWALKERS

Hermann Broch (1886–1951) was born in Vienna, where he trained as an engineer and studied philosophy and mathematics. He gradually increased his involvement in the intellectual life of Vienna, becoming acquainted with Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sigmund Freud, and Robert Musil, among others. *The Sleepwalkers* was his first major work. In 1938, he was imprisoned as a subversive by the Nazis, but was freed and fled to the United States. In the years before his death, he was researching mass psychology at Yale University. *The Death of Virgil* originally appeared in 1945; his last major novel, *The Guiltless*, was published in 1950.

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BOOKS BY HERMANN BROCH

The Spell

The Guiltless

The Death of Virgil

The Sleepwalkers

HERMANN BROCH

The
SLEEPWALKERS
a trilogy

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY WILLA AND EDWIN MUIR

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Part One

THE ROMANTIC

(1888)

I

IN the year 1888 Herr von Pasenow was seventy, and there were people who felt an extraordinary and inexplicable repulsion when they saw him coming towards them in the streets of Berlin, indeed, who in their dislike of him actually maintained that he must be an evil old man. Small, but well made, neither a shrivelled ancient nor a pot-belly, he was extraordinarily well proportioned, and the top-hat which he always sported in Berlin did not look in the least ridiculous on him. He wore Kaiser Wilhelm I. whiskers, but cut somewhat shorter, and on his cheeks there was none of that white fluff which gave the Emperor his affable appearance; even his hair, which had scarcely thinned yet, showed no more than a few white strands; in spite of his seventy years it had kept its youthful fairness, a reddish blond that reminded one of rotting straw and really did not suit an old man, for whom one would have liked to imagine a more venerable covering. But Herr von Pasenow was accustomed to the colour of his hair, nor in his judgment did his monocle look in the least too youthful. When he gazed in the mirror he recognized there the face that had returned his gaze fifty years before. Yet though Herr von Pasenow was not displeased with himself, there were people whom the looks of this old man filled with discomfort, and who could not comprehend how any woman could ever have looked upon him or embraced him with desire in her eyes; and at most they would allow him only the Polish maids on his estate, and held that even these he must have got round by that slightly hysterical and yet arrogant aggressiveness which is often characteristic of small men. Whether this was true or not, it was the belief of his two sons, and it goes without saying that he did not

share it. For, after all, sons' thoughts are often coloured by prejudice, and it would have been easy to accuse his sons of injustice and bias in spite of the uncomfortable feeling which the sight of Herr von Pasenow aroused, a really remarkable feeling of discomfort that actually increased when he had passed by and one chanced to look after him. Perhaps that was due to the fact that his back view made one doubtful of his age, for his movements were neither like those of an old man, nor like those of a youth, nor like those of a man in the prime of life. And as doubt gives rise to discomfort, it is possible that some chance stroller might have resented as undignified the man's style of progression, and if he should have gone on to characterize it as overweening and vulgar, as feebly rakish and swaggering, one would not have been surprised. Such things, of course, are a matter of temperament: yet one can quite well imagine some young man, blinded with hatred, hurrying back to thrust his cane between the legs of any man who walked in that way, so as to bring him down by hook or by crook and break his legs and put an end for ever to such a style of walking. Herr von Pasenow, however, went straight on with very quick steps; he held his head erect as small men generally do; and as he held himself very erect too, his little belly was stuck slightly forward, one might almost have said that he carried it in front of him; yes, that he was carrying his whole person somewhere or other, belly and all, a hateful gift which nobody wanted. Yet as a simile really accounts for nothing, those ill opinions would have remained without solid foundation, and perhaps one might even have grown ashamed of them until one noticed the walking-stick accompanying his legs. The stick moved to a regular rhythm, rose almost to the height of his knees, returned with a little sharp impact to the ground and rose again, and the feet went on beside it. And these too rose higher than feet should do, the toes shot out a little too far as if they were presenting his shoe-soles in contempt to approaching pedestrians, and the heels were deposited again with a little sharp impact on the pavement. So the two legs and the walking-stick went on together, suggesting the involuntary fancy that this man, had he come to the world as a horse, would have been a pacer; but the horrible and disgusting thing was that he was a three-legged pacer, a tripod that had set itself in motion. And it was horrible, too, to realize that the three-legged purposiveness of the man's walk must be as deceptive as its undeviating rapidity: that it was directed towards nothing at all! For nobody who had a serious end in view could walk like that, and if for a moment one involuntarily thought of a profiteer inexorably conveying himself to some poor man's house to collect a debt, one saw at once how inadequate and prosaic was such a notion, and one was terrified by the intuition that it was a devil's walk, like a dog hobbling on three legs—a rectilinear zigzag … enough: for anyone who analysed Herr von Pasenow's walk with loving hate might have discovered all this and more. Most people, after all, lend themselves to such experiments. There is always something that will fit. And if Herr von Pasenow did not really lead a busy life, but on the contrary expended ample time in fulfilling the decorative and other obligations which a quietly secure income brings with it, yet—and that too expressed his character—he was always bustling, and mere sauntering was far from his nature. Besides, visiting Berlin but twice a year, he had abundance to do when he was there. Just now he was on his way to his younger son, Lieutenant Joachim von Pasenow.

Whenever Joachim von Pasenow met his father, memories of his boyhood thronged up in him as was natural enough: but the most vivid of these were always the events preceding his entrance to the cadet school in Culm. True, it was only fragments of the past that fleetingly emerged, and important and trivial things flowed chaotically through one another. So perhaps it may seem idle and superfluous to mention Jan, the steward, whose image, though he was a quite secondary figure, obtruded itself in front of all the others. But this may have been because Jan was not really a man, but a beard. For hours one could gaze at him and meditate whether, behind that dishevelled landscape covered with impenetrable yet soft undergrowth, a human creature was concealed. Even when Jan spoke—but he did not speak much—one could not be certain of this, for his words took form behind his beard as behind a curtain, and it might as easily have been another who uttered them. But most exciting of all was when Jan yawned; for then the hairy superficies gaped at a pre-ordained point, substantiating the fact that this was also the place where Jan conveyed food into himself. When Joachim had run to him to tell him of his approaching entrance into the cadet school, Jan was having his dinner; and he sat there cutting bread into chunks and silently listening. At last he said: "Well, is the young master glad?" And then Joachim became aware that he was not in the least glad; he actually felt he wanted to cry; but as there was no immediate pretext for that, he only nodded and said that he was glad.

Then there was the Iron Cross that hung in a glass-covered frame in the big drawing-room. It had belonged to a Pasenow who, in the year 1813, had held a high position in the army. Seeing that it always hung on the wall, the great fuss that was made when Uncle Bernhard received one too was somewhat puzzling. Joachim was still ashamed, now in 1888, that he had ever been so stupid. But perhaps he had been embittered merely because they had tried to make the cadet school more palatable to him by dangling

the Iron Cross before him. In any case his brother Helmuth would have been a more suitable subject for the cadet school, and in spite of the years that had passed Joachim still considered it a ridiculous arrangement that the elder son had to take to the land and the younger to the army. The Iron Cross had left him quite indifferent, but Helmuth had been filled with wild enthusiasm when Uncle Bernhard had taken part in the storming of Kissingen with his division, the Goeben. In any case he wasn't even a real uncle, but only a cousin of their father's.

His mother was taller than his father, and everything on the home farm was managed by her. Strange how little attention Helmuth and he had paid to her; they had been like their father in that. They had ignored her stubborn and lackadaisical: "Don't do that," and were only annoyed when she added: "Look out, or your father will catch you." And they weren't in the least daunted when she employed her final threat: "Well, I'm really going to tell your father this time," and scarcely minded even when she fulfilled the threat; for then their father only threw them an angry look and went on his way with his stiff, purposive stride. It was a just punishment on their mother for trying to side with the common enemy.

At that time the predecessor of the present pastor was still in office. He had yellowish white side-whiskers which were hardly distinguishable from the hue of his skin, and when he came to dinner on festival days he used to compare their mother with Empress Luise in the midst of her brood of children. That had been a little ludicrous, but it had made one proud all the same. Then the pastor had acquired yet another habit, that of laying his hand on Joachim's head and calling him "young warrior"; for all of them, even the Polish maids in the kitchen, were already talking about the cadet school in Culm. Nevertheless Joachim was still waiting at that time for the final decision. At table one day his mother had said that she didn't see the necessity of sending Joachim away; he could quite well enter later as an ensign; that was how it had invariably been done, and the custom had always been kept. But Uncle Bernhard replied that the new army required capable men and that in Culm a proper lad would soon find his place. Joachim's father had remained disagreeably silent—as always when his wife said anything, for he never listened to her. Except, indeed, on her birthday, when he clinked glasses with her, and then he borrowed the pastor's comparison and called her his Empress Luise. Perhaps his mother was really against his being sent to Culm, but one could put no dependence on her: she always finished by taking sides with his father.

His mother was very punctual. In the byre at milking time, and in the hen-house when the eggs were being collected she was never absent; in the morning one could always find her in the kitchen, and in the afternoon in the laundry, where she counted the stiff starched linen along with the maids. It was on one of these occasions that he had first heard the news. He had been with his mother in the byre, his nostrils were full of the heavy odour of the stalls, then they stepped out into the cold wintry air and saw Uncle Bernhard coming towards them across the yard. Uncle Bernhard still carried a stick; for after being wounded one was allowed to carry a stick, all convalescents carried sticks even when they had ceased to limp badly. His mother had remained standing, and Joachim had gripped Uncle Bernhard's stick and held it fast. Even to-day he still clearly remembered the ivory crook carved with a coat of arms. Uncle Bernhard said: "Congratulate me, cousin; I've just been made a major." Joachim glanced up at the Major: he was even taller than Joachim's mother and had drawn himself up with a little jerk, proudly yet as if at the word of command, and looked still more warrior-like and straight than usual; and perhaps he had actually grown taller; in any case he was a better match for her than Joachim's father. He had a short beard, but one could see his mouth. Joachim wondered whether it was a great honour to hold a major's stick, and then decided to be slightly proud of it. "Yes," Uncle Bernhard went on, "but now it will mean an end of these lovely days at Stolpin." Joachim's mother replied that it was both good news and bad news, and this was a complicated response which he could not quite understand. They were standing in the snow; his mother had on her brown fur coat which was as soft as herself, and under her fur cap her fair hair escaped. Joachim was always glad when he remembered that he had the same fair hair as his mother, for it meant that he too would become taller than his father, perhaps as tall as Uncle Bernhard; and when Uncle Bernhard nodded to him now, saying, "We'll soon be comrades in the King's uniform," for a moment he felt pleased at the thought. But as his mother only sighed and made no objection, submitting herself just as if she were standing before his father, he let go the stick and ran away to Jan.

He could not discuss the matter with Helmuth; for Helmuth envied him and talked like the grown-ups, who all said that a future soldier should be proud and happy. Jan was the only one who was neither a hypocrite nor a deceiver; he had only asked if the young master was glad, and had not behaved as if he believed it. Of course Helmuth and the others probably meant well and perhaps only wanted to comfort him. Joachim had never got over the fact that at that time he had been secretly convinced of Helmuth's treachery and hypocrisy; for though he had tried to make it good immediately by presenting all his toys to Helmuth, yet he could not have taken them with him into the cadet school, and so it was not a real expiation. He had given Helmuth also his half of the pony which the two boys shared in common, so that

Helmuth possessed a whole horse to himself. These weeks had been pregnant with trouble, and yet good; never, before or afterwards, had he been so intimate with his brother. Then, it is true, came the accident with the pony. For the time being Helmuth had renounced his new rights, and Joachim was given full control of it. But of course that did not mean very much, for in these weeks the ground had been soft and heavy, and there was a standing prohibition against riding in the fields when the ground was in that state. But Joachim felt the superior right of one who would soon be going away, and as Helmuth was agreeable, rode out into the fields on the pretext of giving the pony exercise. He had only started on a quite short canter when the accident happened; the front leg of the pony was caught in a deep hole; it fell and could not get up again. Helmuth came running, and after him the coachman. The pony lay with its dishevelled head in the mire, its tongue hanging sideways out of its mouth. Joachim could still see Helmuth and himself kneeling there and stroking the pony's head, but he could not remember any longer how they had got home and only knew that he had found himself in the kitchen, which had suddenly become very still, and that everybody was staring at him as if he had committed a crime. Then he had heard his mother's voice: "Your father must be told." And then he was suddenly in his father's study, and it seemed to him that the punishment which his mother had menaced him with so often in that hateful sentence, was now, after being stored up and accumulated, about to fall on his head. But nothing happened. His father only kept on walking up and down the room in silence, and Joachim tried to stand straight, gazing at the antlers on the wall. Still nothing happened, and his eyes began to wander and remained fixed on the bluish sand in the frilled paper that covered the polished brown hexagonal spittoon beside the stove. He had almost forgotten why he was there; but the room seemed vaster than ever and there was an icy weight on his chest. Finally his father stuck the monocle into his eye: "It's high time that you were out of the house"; and then Joachim knew that they had all been duping him, even Helmuth himself, and at that moment he was glad that the pony had broken its leg; for his mother, too, had been telling tales on him so as to get him out of the house. Then he could see that his father was taking his pistol out of its case. And then he vomited. Next day he learned from the doctor that he was suffering from concussion, and that made him proud. Helmuth sat on his bed, and although Joachim knew that the pony had been shot by his father, neither of them said a word about it, and these were very happy days, strangely secure and remote from the lives of all the grown-ups. Nevertheless they came to an end, and after a delay of a few weeks he was deposited at the cadet school in Culm. Yet when he stood there before his narrow bed, so distant and remote from his sick-bed at Stolpin, it almost seemed to him that he had brought the remoteness with him, and at the beginning that made his new surroundings endurable.

Naturally there were a great number of things belonging to this time that he had forgotten, yet a disturbing residue remained, and in his dreams he sometimes imagined that he was speaking Polish. When he was made lieutenant he presented Helmuth with a horse which he had himself ridden for a long time. Yet he could not free himself from the feeling that he was still slightly in his brother's debt, and sometimes even thought of Helmuth as an importunate creditor. But that was all nonsense, and he very seldom thought of it. It was only when his father came to Berlin that those ideas awakened again, and when he asked after his mother and Helmuth he never forgot to inquire after the health of the nag as well.

Now that Joachim von Pasenow had put on his civilian frock-coat and between the two corners of his peaked stiff collar his chin was enjoying unaccustomed freedom, now that he had fixed on his curly-brimmed top-hat and picked up a walking-stick with a pointed ivory crook handle, now that he was on the way to the hotel to take out his father for the obligatory evening's entertainment, suddenly Eduard von Bertrand's image rose up before him, and he felt glad his civilian clothes did not sit on him with by any means the same inevitability as on that gentleman, whom in secret he sometimes thought of as a traitor. Unfortunately it was only to be expected and feared that he would meet Bertrand in the fashionable resorts he would have to visit with his father that evening, and already during the performance in the Winter Garden he was keeping an eye open for him and seriously considering the question whether he could introduce such a man to his father.

The problem still occupied him as they were being driven in a droshky through Friedrichstrasse to the Jäger Casino. They sat stiffly and silently, with their sticks between their knees, on the tattered black-leather seats, and when a chance girl on her beat shouted something to them Joachim stared straight in front, while his father, his monocle rigidly fixed, muttered: "Idiotic." Yes, since Herr von Pasenow had first come to Berlin many things had changed, and even if one accepted it, yet one could not close one's eyes to the fact that the innovating policy of the founder of the Reich had produced some very curious fruits. Herr von Pasenow said, as he was accustomed to say every year: "Paris itself isn't any worse than this," and when they stopped in front of the Jäger Casino the row of flaring gas-lamps before it, drawing the attention of passers-by to the entrance, excited his disapproval.

A narrow wooden stair led up to the first floor where the dancing-halls were, and Herr von Pasenow climbed it with the bustling, undeviating air which was characteristic of him. A black-haired girl was descending. She squeezed herself into a corner of the landing to let the visitors pass; and as she could not help smiling, it seemed, at the old gentleman's fussiness, Joachim made a somewhat embarrassed and deprecatory gesture. And once more he felt a compulsion to picture Bertrand either as this girl's lover, or as her bully, or as something else equally fantastic; and no sooner was he in the dancing-hall than he looked searchingly around for him. But of course Bertrand was not there: on the contrary Joachim found two officers from his own regiment, and now he remembered for the first time that it had been himself who had incited them to come to the casino, so that he might not be left alone with his father, or with his father and Bertrand.

In acknowledgment of his age and position Herr von Pasenow was greeted with a slight, stiff bow and a click of the heels, as if he were a military superior, and it was indeed with the air of a commanding general that he inquired if the gentlemen were enjoying themselves: he would feel honoured if they would drink a glass of champagne with him; whereupon the gentlemen made known their agreement by clicking their heels again. A new bottle of champagne was brought. They all sat stiffly and dumbly in their chairs, drank to each other in silence, and regarded the hall, the white-and-gilt decorations, the gas flames that hissed, surrounded by tobacco smoke, on the branches of the great circular chandelier, and stared at the dancers who were revolving in the middle of the floor. At last Herr von Pasenow said: "Well, gentlemen, I hope that you aren't refraining from the company of the fair sex on my account." Bows and smiles. "Some pretty girls here too. As I was coming upstairs I met a very promising piece, black hair, and with eyes that you young fellows couldn't remain indifferent to." Joachim was so ashamed that he could have throttled the old man to suppress such unseemly words, but already one of his comrades was replying that it must have been Ruzena, really an unusually pretty girl, and one couldn't deny her a certain elegance either; anyhow, most of the ladies here were better than might be expected, for the management were very strict in selecting their girls and laid a great deal of importance on the maintenance of a refined tone. Meanwhile Ruzena had returned to the dancing-hall; she had taken the arm of a fair girl, and as they sauntered past the tables and boxes with their high coiffures and tight-laced figures they actually produced an elegant impression. As they were passing Herr von Pasenow's table they were asked jestingly whether Ruzena's ears had not been tingling, and Herr von Pasenow added that, to judge from her name, he must be addressing a fair Pole, consequently almost a countrywoman of his. No, she was not Polish, said Ruzena, but Bohemian, or as people said in this country, Czech; but Bohemian was more correct, for the proper name of her country was Bohemia. "All the better," said Herr von Pasenow, "the Poles are no good … unreliable.… Well, it doesn't matter."

Meanwhile the two girls had sat down, and Ruzena began to talk in a deep voice, laughing at herself, for she had not yet learned to speak German correctly. Joachim was annoyed at his father for conjuring up the memory of the Polish maids, but was forced himself to think of one of the harvest workers who, when he was a little boy, had lifted him up on to the wagon with the sheaves. Yet though in her hard, staccato pronunciation she made hay of the German language, still she was a young lady, stiffly corseted, who lifted her champagne-glass to her lips with a proper air, and so was not in the least like a Polish harvest worker; whether the talk about his father and the maids were true or not. Joachim had nothing to do with that, but this gentle girl wasn't to be treated by the old man in the way he was probably accustomed to. All the same Joachim was unable to envisage the life of a Bohemian girl as any different from that of a Polish one—indeed even among German civilians it was difficult to divine the individual behind the puppet—and when he tried to imagine Ruzena as coming out of a good home, with a good matronly mother and a decent suitor with gloves on, it did not fit her; and he could not get rid of the feeling that in Bohemia life must be wild and low, as among the Tartars. He was sorry for Ruzena, although she reminded him somewhat of a humble little beast of prey in whose throat a dark cry is strangled, dark as the Bohemian forests, and he longed to know whether one could talk to her as one talked to a lady; for all this was so terrifying and yet seductive, and in a way justified his father and his father's lewd intentions. He was afraid that Ruzena, too, would see through these, and he sought for an answer in her face; she noticed it and smiled to him; yet she let the old man fondle her hand which was hanging languidly over the edge of the table, and the old man did it quite openly, and tried at the same time to summon up his scraps of Polish to erect a lingual hedge round the girl and himself. Of course it was wrong of her to allow him such liberties, and when at Stolpin they maintained that Polish maids were quite unreliable perhaps they were right. Yet perhaps she was only weak, and one's honour demanded that she should be protected from the old man's advances. But that would be the duty of her lover; if Bertrand possessed the slightest vestige of chivalry he was in duty bound to appear now to put everything in order with a word. And suddenly Joachim began to talk about Bertrand to his fellow-officers: hadn't they heard any word of Bertrand lately and of what he was doing; yes, a

curiously reserved fellow, Eduard von Bertrand. But his comrades, who had already drunk a good deal of champagne, gave him confused answers and were beyond being surprised at anything, even at the pertinacity with which Joachim harped on the theme of Bertrand; and cunningly and persistently as he brought out the name in a loud and distinct voice, not even the girls twitched an eyelash, and the suspicion mounted within him that Bertrand might have sunk so low as to come here under an assumed name; and so he turned directly to Ruzena and asked whether she didn't know von Bertrand—until the old man, keen of hearing, and officious as ever in spite of the champagne, asked why Joachim was so hot on the track of this von Bertrand: "You're as eager about him as if he were hidden somewhere in the place." Joachim reddened and denied it, but the old man had been set going: yes, he had known the father well, old Colonel von Bertrand. He had departed this life, very likely it was this Eduard who had brought him to his grave. When his waster of a son had chucked the army he had taken it, people said, very much to heart; nobody knew why, or whether there mightn't have been something shady behind it. Joachim became indignant. "Pardon me, but that's only empty gossip—and the last thing that Bertrand can be called is a waster!" "Gently, gently," replied the old man, turning again to Ruzena's hand, on which he now pressed a long kiss; Ruzena calmly permitted it and regarded Joachim, whose soft fair hair reminded her of the children at the village school in Bohemia. "I not will flatter you," she said in her staccato voice to the old man, "but nice hair has your son." Then she seized the head of her friend, held it pressed to Joachim's, and was delighted to see that the colour of the hair was the same. "Would be beautiful pair," she declared to the two heads, and ran her hands through their hair. The other girl shrieked, because her coiffure was being disarranged; Joachim felt a soft hand touching the back of his head, he had a slight sensation of dizziness and threw his head back as if he wished to catch the hand between his neck and his collar and force it to remain there; but then the hand slipped of its own accord down to the back of his neck, and stroked it quickly and timorously, and was gone. "Gently, gently!" he heard his father's dry voice again, and then he noticed that the old man had taken out his pocket-book, had drawn out two large notes, and was on the point of pressing them on the two girls. Yes, that was just how he used to throw marks to the harvest girls when he was in a good mood, and though Joachim wanted to intervene now he could not prevent the fifty-mark note from being pressed into Ruzena's hand, nor her from sticking it gaily into her pocket. "Thanks, papa," she said, then she bettered her words, "papa-in-law," and winked at Joachim. Joachim was pale with rage: the old man would buy a girl for him for fifty marks, would he? Quick of hearing, the old man caught Ruzena's quip and seized on it: "So! It seems to me that my young rascal has caught your fancy.… Well, you have my blessing.…" Swine, thought Joachim. But now the old man was in full sail: "Ruzena, my sweet child, to-morrow I'll call on you and fix up the match in proper style, all tip-top. What shall I bring you as a wedding gift? … But you must tell me the address of your castle.…" Joachim looked away like one who at an execution does not wish to see the axe falling, but Ruzena suddenly stiffened, her eyes went blind, her lips quivered, she pushed away a hand that was stretched out in help or concern, and ran away to cry herself out beside the woman who attended to the lavatory.

"Well, well," said Herr von Pasenow, "but it must be quite late! I'm afraid we must be going, gentlemen." In the droshky father and son sat side by side, stiff and hostile, their sticks between their knees. At last the old man said: "Well, she accepted the fifty marks, all the same. And then she took to her heels." What a wretch, thought Joachim.

On the theme of the military uniform Bertrand could have supplied some such theory as this:

Once upon a time it was the Church alone that was exalted as judge over mankind, and every layman knew that he was a sinner. Nowadays it is the layman who has to judge his fellow-sinner if all values are not to fall into anarchy, and instead of weeping with him, brother must say to brother: "You have done wrong." And as once it was only the garments of the priest that marked a man off from his fellows as something higher, some hint of the layman peeping through even the uniform and the robe of office, so, when the great intolerance of faith was lost, the secular robe of office had to supplant the sacred one, and society had to separate itself into secular hierarchies with secular uniforms and invest these with the absolute authority of a creed. And because, when the secular exalts itself as the absolute, the result is always romanticism, so the real and characteristic romanticism of that age was the cult of the uniform, which implied, as it were, a superterrestrial and supertemporal idea of uniform, an idea which did not really exist and yet was so powerful that it took hold of men far more completely than any secular vocation could, a non-existent and yet so potent idea that it transformed the man in uniform into a property of his uniform, and never into a professional man in the civilian sense; and this perhaps simply because the man who wears the uniform is content to feel that he is fulfilling the most essential function of his age and therefore guaranteeing the security of his own life.

This is what Bertrand might have said; but though it is certain that not every wearer of uniform is

conscious of such things, yet it may be maintained that everyone who has worn a uniform for many years finds in it a better organization of life than the man who merely exchanges one civilian suit in the evening for another civilian suit during the day. True, the soldier has no real need to think deeply of these things, for a generic uniform provides its wearer with a definitive line of demarcation between his person and the world; it is like a hard casing against which one's personality and the world beat sharply and distinctly and are differentiated from each other; for it is the uniform's true function to manifest and ordain order in the world, to arrest the confusion and flux of life, just as it conceals whatever in the human body is soft and flowing, covering up the soldier's underclothes and skin, and decreeing that sentries on guard should wear white gloves. So when in the morning a man has fastened up his uniform to the last button, he acquires a second and thicker hide, and feels that he has returned to his more essential and steadfast being. Closed up in his hard casing, braced in with straps and belts, he begins to forget his own undergarments, and the uncertainty of life, yes, life itself, recedes to a distance. Then, after he has finished by pulling down his tunic so that it stretches smooth and without a crease over chest and back,—then even the child whom he sincerely loves, and the woman in whose embrace he begot that child, recede into such a civilian remoteness that the mouths which they present to him in farewell are almost strange to him, and his home becomes something foreign, which in his uniform he dare not enter. Should he next proceed in his uniform to the barracks or to his office, it must not be thought pride that makes him ignore men otherwise clothed; it is simply that he can no longer comprehend that such alien and barbarous raiment can clothe anything even faintly resembling actual humanity as he feels it in himself. Yet this does not mean that the man in uniform has become blind, nor that he is filled with blind prejudices, as is commonly assumed; he remains all the time a man like you and me, dreams of food and love, even reads his newspaper at breakfast; but he is no longer tied to things, and as they scarcely concern him any longer he is able to divide them into the good and the bad, for on intolerance and lack of understanding the security of life is based.

Whenever Joachim von Pasenow was compelled to put on civilian clothes Eduard von Bertrand came into his mind, and he was always glad that mufti did not sit on him with the same assurance as on that man; yet he was very eager to know what Bertrand's views were on the question of uniform. For Eduard von Bertrand had of course every reason to reflect on the problem, seeing that he had laid aside the uniform once for all and decided for the clothing of a civilian. That had been astonishing enough. He had been passed out of the cadet school in Culm two years before Pasenow, and while there had acted exactly like the others; had like the others worn white trousers in summer, had eaten at the same table, had passed his examinations like the others; and yet when he became a second lieutenant the incomprehensible thing happened: without ostensible cause he quitted the service and vanished into a kind of life quite foreign to him—vanished into the labyrinth of the city, as people called it, into a labyrinth from which he emerged only now and then. If one met him in the street one was always a little uncertain whether to greet him or not, feeling that he was a traitor who had carried over to another world and there offered up something which had been a common possession, and that in confronting him one was exposed and naked, while he himself gave away nothing about his motives and his life, and maintained always the same equable friendly reserve. But perhaps the disturbing factor lay simply in Bertrand's civilian clothes, in the fact that his white stiff shirt-front was so exposed that one really had to feel ashamed for him. Besides, Bertrand himself had once declared in Culm that no genuine soldier would ever allow his shirt-cuffs to appear below his sleeves, because everything connected with being born, sleeping, loving and dying—in short, everything civilian—was a matter of underclothing; and even if such paradoxes had always been characteristic of Bertrand, no less than the airy gesture with which he was accustomed, lazily and disdainfully, to disavow them afterwards, yet obviously he must have been troubled at that time by the problem of the uniform. And about the underclothing and the shirt-cuffs he may have been partly right: for instance when one reflected—and Bertrand always awakened such unpleasant reflections—that all men, civilians and Joachim's father not excepted, wore their shirts stuck into their trousers. For that reason Joachim actually did not like to encounter anyone in the men's barracks with his tunic open; there was something indecent about it, which gave one a vague inkling of the justification for the regulation that when visiting certain resorts and for other erotic purposes mufti must be worn; and more, which made it appear almost like an offence against the regulations that such beings as married officers and married non-commissioned officers should exist. When the married sergeant-major reported for morning service and opened two buttons of his tunic so as to draw out of the opening, which laid bare his checked shirt, his huge red-leather book, Joachim generally ran his fingers over his own tunic buttons, and felt secure only when he had certified that they were all in order. He could almost have wished that the uniform was a direct emanation of his skin, and often he thought to himself that that was the real function of a uniform, and wished at least that his underclothes could by a distinctive pattern be made a component part of the uniform. For it was uncanny to think that every soldier carried about with him under his tunic the anarchical passions common to all men. Perhaps

the world would have gone off the rails altogether had not someone at the last moment invented stiff shirt-fronts for the civilians, thus transforming the shirt into a white board and making it quite unrecognizable as underclothing. Joachim recalled his astonishment as a child, when, looking at the portrait of his grandfather, he had recognized that that gentleman did not wear a stiff shirt, but a lace jabot. But then in his time men had had a deeper and more intimate faith, and did not need to seek any further bulwark against anarchy. Of course all these notions were rather silly and obviously only an overflow from the kind of things Bertrand said, which had neither rhyme nor reason; Pasenow was almost ashamed of thinking of them in front of the sergeant-major, and when they surged up he thrust them aside and with a jerk resumed his stiff, official bearing.

But even if he thrust aside those thoughts as foolish, and accepted the uniform as a decree of nature, there was more in all this than a mere question of attire, more than a something which gave his life style at least, if not content. Often he fancied that by saying "Comrades in the King's uniform" he could put an end to the whole question, and to Bertrand too, although in doing so he was far from desiring to express any extraordinary reverence for the King's uniform or to indulge an overweening vanity; he was rather concerned that his elegance of figure should neither exceed nor fall short of a definitely demarcated and prescribed correctness, and he had actually been a little flattered when once some ladies expressed the opinion, which was well grounded, that the straight, wooden cut of the uniform and the glaring colours of the bright cloth went but indifferently with his face, and that the brown-velvet jacket and flowing necktie of an artist would suit him far better. The fact that in spite of this the uniform meant much more to him may be explained by the obstinacy which he inherited from his mother, who always stuck immovably to a custom once formed. And sometimes it seemed that for him there could never be any other attire, although he was still full of resentment at his mother for submitting herself without a struggle to Uncle Bernhard's opinions. And now, of course, it had all been decided, and if one has been accustomed to wear a uniform from one's tenth year, sooner or later it grows into one's flesh like the shirt of Nessus, and no one, and least of all Joachim von Pasenow, will be able to specify then where the frontier between his self and his uniform lies. For even if his military vocation had not grown into him, as he into it, his uniform would still have been the symbol for many things; in the course of years he had fattened and rounded it with so many ideas that, securely enclosed in it, he could no longer live without it; enclosed and cut off from the world and the house of his father in such security and peace that he could scarce distinguish, scarce notice, that his uniform left him only a thin strip of personal and human freedom no broader than the narrow strip of starched cuff which was all that an officer was allowed to show. He did not like to put on mufti, and he was glad that his uniform protected him from visits to questionable resorts, where he pictured the civilian Bertrand in the company of loose women. For often he was overcome with the uncanny fear that he too might slip into the same inexplicable rut as Bertrand. And that also was why he bore a grudge against his father for his having to accompany him, and in mufti at that, on the obligatory round of the Berlin night haunts with which ended, in accordance with tradition, the old man's visits to the capital of the Empire.

When next day Joachim escorted his father to the train the latter said: "Well, as soon as you're a captain, and that won't be long now, we'll have to think of finding a wife for you. How about Elisabeth? The Baddensens have a nice little property over there at Lestow, and it will all go to the girl some day." Joachim said nothing. Yesterday he almost bought me a girl for fifty marks, he thought, and to-day he is trying to arrange a legitimate engagement. Or had the old man himself some hankerings after Elisabeth, as after the other girl, whose fingers Joachim could still feel on the back of his neck? But it was incredible to him that anyone at all should dare to think of Elisabeth with sensual desire, and still more incredible that any man should want to incite his son to violate a saint because he was unable to do it himself. Joachim almost felt like asking his father's pardon for the monstrous suspicion; but really the old man was capable of anything. Yes, it was one's duty to protect all the women in the world from this old man, Joachim thought as they were walking along the platform, and while he saluted the departing train he was still thinking it. But when the train had disappeared his thoughts returned to Ruzena.

And in the evening he was still thinking of Ruzena. There are evenings in spring when the twilight lasts far longer than the astronomically prescribed period. Then a thin smoky mist sinks over the city and gives it the subdued suspense of evenings preceding a holiday. And at the same time it is as if this subdued, pale grey mist had netted so much light that brighter strands remain in it even when it has become quite black and velvety. So these twilights last very long, so long that the proprietors of shops forget to close them; they stand gossiping with their acquaintances before the doors, until a passing policeman smilingly draws their attention to the fact that they are exceeding the regulation closing-time. And even then a beam of light shines from many a shop, for in the back room the family are sitting at their supper; they have not put up the shutters as usual in front of the door, but only placed a chair there to show that customers cannot be

served; and when they have finished their supper they will come out, bringing their chairs with them, and take their ease before the shop-door. They are enviable, the small shopkeepers and tradespeople who live behind their shops, enviable in winter when they put up the heavy shutters so as to enjoy doubly the warmth and security of the lighted room, through whose glass door at Christmastime the glittering Christmas-tree can be seen from the shop; enviable in the mild spring and autumn evenings when, holding a cat, or stroking the soft head of a dog, they sit before their doors as on a terraced garden.

Returning from the barracks Joachim walked through the streets of the suburb. It was not fitting for one of his rank to do this, and the officers always drove home in the regimental carriages. Nobody ever went walking here—even Bertrand would not have thought of it—and the fact that he himself was doing so now was as disturbing to Joachim as if he had made a false step. Was it not almost as if in doing so he were humiliating himself for Ruzena's sake? Or was it an indirect humiliation of Ruzena? For in his fantasy she now occupied quite definitely a suburban flat, perhaps that very cellar-like little shop before whose dark entry greens and vegetables were spread for purchase; and perhaps it was Ruzena's mother who squatted in front of it, knitting and talking in her dark foreign speech. He smelt the smoky odour of paraffin lamps. In the low vaulted cellar a light shone out. It came from a lamp fixed into the dingy wall at the back. He felt he could almost sit there himself with Ruzena before the cellar, her hand ruffling his hair. But he was startled when he became conscious of this thought, and to drive it away he tried to imagine that over Lestow the same light grey dusk was settling. And in the park, silent under the mist and already fragrant with dewy herbs, he saw Elisabeth; she was walking slowly towards the house, from whose windows the soft light of the paraffin lamps shone out into the falling dusk, and her little dog was there too, and it, too, seemed to be tired after the day. But as he thought more intently and intimately it was Ruzena and himself that he saw on the terrace in front of the house, and Ruzena's caressing hand was resting on the back of his head.

It went without saying that in those beautiful spring days one was in good spirits, and that business was flourishing. Bertrand, who had been in Berlin for a few days, felt this too. Yet in his heart he knew his good spirits came simply from the success which, for years now, had followed all his transactions, and conversely that his good spirits were needed to bring about further success. It was like a propitious gliding with the current, and instead of himself making towards the things he wanted he saw them come floating towards him. Perhaps this had been one of the reasons why he had left the regiment: there were so many things which invited him and from which at that time he was excluded. What did the brass plates of banks, solicitors and export firms mean to him then? They were only empty words at which one did not look, or which disturbed one. Now he knew a great number of things about banks, knew what took place behind the counter, yes, understood not only all that was connoted by the inscriptions discount, foreign exchange, deposits, and so on, but knew also what went on in the directors' offices, could size up a bank by its deposits and its reserves, and draw lively conclusions from a fluctuation in shares. He understood such export terms as transit and bonded warehouse, and all this had come very natural to him, had become as matter of course as the brass plate in the Steinweg in Hamburg:

Eduard von Bertrand, Cotton Importer." And the fact that now a similar plate could be seen in the Rolandstrasse in Bremen and the Cotton Exchange in Liverpool actually gave him a feeling of pride.

When in Unter den Linden he met Pasenow, angular in his long military coat with the epaulets, his very shoulders angular, while he himself was comfortably clad in a suit of English cloth, he felt quite elated, greeted Pasenow airily and familiarly as he always greeted his old comrades, and asked him without further ado if he had lunched yet and if he would come with him to Dressel's.

Taken aback by the sudden encounter and the quick cordiality, Pasenow forgot how much he had been thinking of Bertrand these last few days; once more he felt ashamed to be talking in his spick-and-span uniform to a man who stood before him naked, as it were, in mufti, and he would have been glad to evade the invitation. But all that he found himself saying was that it was a terribly long time since he had seen Bertrand. Oh, considering the monotonous and settled life he led that wasn't surprising, replied Bertrand. To himself, on the contrary, always harried and on the move as he was, it seemed only yesterday that they had worn their swords for the first time in Unter den Linden and had their first supper at Dressel's—by this time they had entered—and yet they had grown older meanwhile. Pasenow thought: "He talks too much," but because it pleased him to think that Bertrand possessed obnoxious qualities, or because he vaguely felt that his friend's previous taciturnity had always mortified him—in spite of his horror of being indiscreet he asked where Bertrand had been all this time. Bertrand made a slight deprecatory gesture with his hand as if he were dismissing something quite unimportant: "Oh, lots of places. I'm just back from America." Hm, America—for Joachim America was still the country where unruly or disinherited or degenerate sons were sent, and old von Bertrand must have died of grief after all! But again this thought did not seem to fit the

assured and obviously prosperous man who sat opposite him. Of course Pasenow had heard often of such ne'er-do-wells working their way up over there as farmers and then returning to Germany to look for a German bride, and perhaps this fellow had come to fetch Ruzena; but no, she wasn't German but Czech, or rather, for that was the proper term, Bohemian. Yet, as the idea still stuck in his mind, he asked: "And you're going back again?" "No, not immediately, I must go to India first." A mere adventurer, in fact! And Pasenow cast a glance round the restaurant, feeling embarrassed to be sitting there with an adventurer; yet there was nothing else for it but to see it through: "So you're always travelling, then?" "Oh, it's only on business that I travel—but I like travelling about. Of course a man should always do what his demon drives him to." And with that the cat was out of the bag; now he knew; Bertrand had quitted the service simply to go into business, from mere greed, mere avarice. But, thick-skinned as these profiteers always were, Bertrand did not feel his contempt and went on without embarrassment: "Look here, Pasenow! It's more and more incomprehensible to me how you can stick it out here. Why don't you at least report for colonial service, seeing that the country has provided that amusement for you?" Pasenow and his comrades had never bothered themselves about the colonial problem: that was the preserve of the navy; all the same he felt indignant: "Amusement?" Bertrand had once more that ironical curl to his lips: "Well, what else is there in it? A little private amusement and glory for the soldiers immediately concerned. All honour, of course, to Dr Peters, and if he had appeared earlier I should certainly have been with him, but what other elements are there except pure romanticism? It's romantic from every point of view—except for the activities of the Catholic and Protestant missions, of course, who are doing sober and useful work. But as for the rest—a joke, nothing but a joke." He spoke so disdainfully that Pasenow was honestly indignant, but what he said sounded merely as if he were offended: "Why should we Germans fall behind the other countries?" "I'll tell you something, Pasenow: first, England is England; second, even in England every day isn't a holiday; third, I shall always invest my spare capital in English colonies rather than in German; so, you see, even from a business point of view it's romantic for us to have colonies; and fourthly, as I said before, it's only the Church that ever has a real palpable interest in colonial expansion." Joachim von Pasenow's mortified admiration grew, and along with it the suspicion that this Bertrand fellow was trying to blind him and dupe him and lead him into a trap by his enigmatic and conceited generalizations. In some way all this went with Bertrand's hair, which was quite unmilitary, indeed almost curly. It was theatrical in some way. The words, "the pit," "the bottomless pit," came into Joachim's mind: why did this man keep on talking of religion and the Church? But before he could gather himself together to reply Bertrand had already noticed his astonishment: "Yes, you see, Europe has already become a pretty dubious field for the Church. But Africa, on the other hand! Hundreds of millions of souls as raw material for the Faith. And you can rest assured that a baptized negro is a better Christian than twenty Europeans. If the Catholics and the Protestants want to steal a march on each other for the winning of these fanatics it's very understandable; for there's where the future of their religion lies; there will be found the future warriors of the faith who will march out one day, burning and slaying in Christ's name, against a heathen Europe sunk in corruption, to set at last, amid the smoking ruins of Rome, a black Pope on the throne of Peter." That's like Revelation, thought Pasenow; he's blaspheming now. And what did the souls of negroes matter to him? Slave-dealing had surely been abolished, although a man obsessed by greed for filthy lucre might even be capable of that. And Bertrand had just been talking of his demon. But perhaps he had only been joking; even in the cadet school one had never known when Bertrand was serious. "You're joking! And as for the Spahis and Turcos, we've settled with them for good." Bertrand could not but smile, and he smiled so winningly and frankly that Joachim too could not keep himself from smiling. So they smiled frankly at each other and their souls nodded to each other through the windows of their eyes, just for an instant, like two neighbours who have never greeted each other and now happen to lean out of their windows at the same moment, pleased and embarrassed by this unforeseen and simultaneous greeting. Convention rescued them out of their embarrassment, and lifting his glass Bertrand said: "Prosit, Pasenow!" and Pasenow replied: "Prosit, Bertrand!" whereupon they had both to smile again.

When they left the restaurant and were standing in Unter den Linden under the somewhat parched, motionless trees in the hot light of the afternoon sun, Pasenow remembered the reply which he had been too shy to utter when they were having lunch: "I really can't understand what quarrel you have with the faith of us Europeans. It seems to me that you people who live in cities don't have the proper understanding for that. When one has grown up in the country, like myself, one has quite a different attitude to these things. And our peasants out there are far more closely bound to religion than you seem to think." In saying this to Bertrand's face he felt somehow daring, like a subaltern trying to explain what strategy was to a Staff officer, and he was a little afraid lest Bertrand should take it badly. But Bertrand only replied cheerfully: "Well, then, probably everything will turn out splendidly after all." And then they exchanged addresses and promised that they would remain in touch with each other.

Pasenow took a droshky and drove out to the west end to the races. The Rhine wine, the afternoon heat, and perhaps also the strangeness of his encounter, had left behind his forehead and at the back of his temples—he would have dearly liked to take off his stiff cap—a dark, flawed feeling, reminding him of the leather seat he was sitting on, which he was prodding with his gloved finger-tips; it was actually a little sticky, so hotly did the sun burn upon it. He was sorry he had not invited Bertrand to go with him, but he was glad at least that his father was no longer in Berlin, for he would certainly have been sitting there beside him. Yet on the other hand he was sincerely glad not to have Bertrand accompanying him in his civilian clothes. But perhaps Bertrand wanted to give him a surprise and had called for Ruzena now, and they would all meet at the races again. Like a family. But of course that was all nonsense. Not even Bertrand would show himself at the races with a girl like that.

When a few days later Leindorff, one of Joachim's fellow-officers, received a visit from his father, to Pasenow it was like a sign from heaven bidding him go to the Jäger Casino and be there before old Leindorff, whom he already saw mounting the narrow stairs with an undeviating, bustling air. He drove to his flat in the regimental carriage and put on his civilian clothes. Then he set out. At the corner he met two soldiers; he was about to bring up his hand perfunctorily to his cap in reply to their salute, when he noticed that they had not saluted him at all, and realised that instead of his cap he was wearing his top-hat. All this was somehow comic and he could not help smiling, because it was so absurd to think that old Count Leindorff, half paralysed as he was, thinking of nothing but his consultations with his doctors, should visit the Jäger Casino that evening. Probably the wisest thing would be simply to turn back, but as he could do that at any time he liked, he enjoyed the slight feeling of freedom this gave him and went on. Yet he would rather have gone for a stroll in the suburbs to see again the little cellar-like greengrocery-shop and the smoking paraffin lamp; but of course he really could not parade in the northern suburbs in his frock-coat and top-hat. Out there the twilight would probably be again as magical as on that other evening, but here in the actual centre of the city everything seemed hostile to Nature: above the noisy light and the innumerable shop-windows and the animated life of the streets, even the sky and the air seemed so urban and unfamiliar that it was like a fortunate and reassuring, yet disconcerting, rediscovery of familiar things when he found a little linen-shop, in whose narrow window lace, ruches and half-finished hand-worked embroideries picked out in blue were lying, and saw a glass door at the back which obviously led to a living-room. Behind the counter a white-haired woman—she seemed almost a lady—was sitting, and beside her was a young girl whose face he could not see; both of them were busied with hand-work. He examined the wares in the window and wondered whether it might not please Ruzena to present her with a few of those lace handkerchiefs. But this too seemed to him absurd, so he walked on, but at the first corner turned and went back again, driven by his desire to see the averted face of the girl. He bought three flimsy handkerchiefs without really deciding to give them to Ruzena, quite haphazardly, simply to please the old lady by buying something. The girl's looks, however, were indifferent; indeed she actually looked cross. Then he went home.

In winter during the Court festivities, to which without admitting it the Baroness looked forward, and in spring during the races and the summer shopping, the Baddensen family occupied a trim house in the west end, and one Sunday morning Joachim von Pasenow paid the ladies his duty call. It was seldom that he visited this outlying villa suburb, an imitation of the English model which was spreading rapidly, although only rich families accustomed to a permanent equipage could live here without being keenly aware of the disadvantage of its distance from the city. But for those privileged persons who could afford to qualify this spatial disadvantage the place was a little rustic paradise, and walking through the trim streets between the villas Pasenow was pleasantly and delightfully penetrated by a sense of the superiority of the neighbourhood. During the last few days he had become uncertain about many things, and this in some inexplicable way was connected with Bertrand; some pillar or other of life had become shaky, and though everything still remained in its old place, because the parts reciprocally supported each other, yet along with a vague wish that the vaulted arch of this equilibrium might cave in and entomb beneath it all that was tottering and uncertain, a fear had arisen at the same time that the wish might really be fulfilled, and there had grown within him a longing for permanence, security and peace. Well, this comfortable neighbourhood with its castellar edifices in the most excellent Renaissance, Baroque and Swiss styles, surrounded by carefully tended gardens in which one could hear the scrape of gardeners' rakes, the hiss of garden hoses and the splashing of fountains; all this breathed out a great and insular security, so that one could not really believe in Bertrand's dictum that even in England every day was not a holiday. From open windows rang out *études* by Stephen Heller and Clementi: the daughters of these families could devote themselves to their pianos in complete security: theirs was a safe and gentle existence, filled with friendship until friendship should give place to love and love once more die away into friendship. Far off, but not too

far off, a cock crowed as if he too wished to indicate the rusticity of this well-planned suburb: yes, if Bertrand had grown up on the land he would not be spreading insecurity, and had they allowed Joachim himself to stay at home he wouldn't have been so susceptible to this feeling of insecurity. It would be lovely to walk with Elisabeth through the fields, and take the ears of the ripening corn between one's expert fingers, and in the evenings, when the heavy odour of the byre was carried on the wind, to cross the neatly swept yard and look on while the cows were being milked. Elisabeth would stand there among the great rustical beasts, far too slight for the ponderousness of her surroundings, and what in his mother had seemed merely natural and homely would be in her both homely and touching. But for him it was much too late for all that, for him whom they had made an outcast, and he was—now the thought struck him—as homeless as Bertrand.

And now the fold of the garden, whose railings were concealed by hedges, enclosed him. The security of nature here was still further enhanced by the fact that the Baroness had had one of the plush sofas from the drawing-room brought out into the garden: it stood there like something exotic reared in a hot-house, with its turned legs and swivelled feet resting on the gravel, lauding the friendliness of a climate and a civilized nature which permitted it such a station; its hue was a fading damask rose. Elisabeth and Joachim sat on iron garden-chairs, whose metal seats were pierced with stars like frozen Brussels lace.

After they had exhausted the excellences of the neighbourhood, which were bound to appeal particularly to one accustomed to and fond of country ways, Joachim was asked about his life in the town, and he could not help expressing his longing for the country and trying to justify it. He found that the ladies completely agreed with him; the Baroness in particular assured him again and again that—he mustn't be surprised—but often for days, yes, even for weeks, she never went into the centre of the town, so terrified, yes, terrified, was she of the hubbub, the noise and the tremendous traffic. Well, replied Pasenow, here she had a real haven, and the conversation flowed again for some time round the theme of the superior neighbourhood, until the Baroness, as if she had a delightful surprise in store, informed him almost with an air of secrecy that they had been offered the chance of buying the little house which they had come to love so much. And in the anticipatory joy of possession she invited him to look through the house, to make a *tour du propriétaire*, she added ironically and with a slight touch of embarrassment.

As usual the reception-rooms lay on the ground floor and the bedrooms upstairs. Yes, in the dining-room, which with its carved old German furniture breathed out an oppressive comfort, they were going to make a winter-garden with a fountain, and perhaps transform the drawing-room too. Then they climbed the stairs, at the top and the bottom of which were velvet hangings, and the Baroness went on opening door after door, passing over only the more intimate ones. Hesitatingly and with a slight blush Elisabeth's room was revealed to the masculine eye, but even the cloud of white lace with which her bed, window, washing-table and mirror were hung did not fill Joachim with such a painful and ashamed feeling as the bedroom of her parents; indeed he could almost have reproached the Baroness for making him free of the household and compelling him to be a co-witness of her shame. For now, before his eyes, before everybody's eyes, plainly displayed even before Elisabeth, whom he felt such knowledge confounded and violated, the two beds stood side by side, ready for the sexual uses of the Baroness, whom he now suddenly saw before him, not indeed naked, but unladylike and brazen: here was the double bedchamber, and now in a flash it seemed to him the central point of the house, its hidden and yet obviously visible altar, round which all the other rooms were built. And in the same flash he saw clearly that every house in the long row of villas which he had passed had as its central point a similar bedroom, and that the sonatinas and the *études* sent out through the open windows, behind which the spring breeze softly waved the lace curtains, were only intended to veil the actual facts. So everywhere towards evening the beds of the master and mistress were decked with the sheets that were folded with such hypocritical glossiness in the linen-room, and the servants and the children knew why this was done; everywhere the maids and the children slept, chaste and unpaired, round the coupled central point of the house, they chaste and pure, yet at the service and command of the unchaste and the shameless. How had the Baroness dared, when she was lauding the advantages of the neighbourhood, to include among these the nearness of the church? Should not she enter it with humility, and as it were barefoot? Perhaps this was what Bertrand had meant when he spoke of the unchristian age, and it became intelligible to Joachim that the black warriors of God must fall on this abomination with fire and sword, so as again to restore true chastity and Christlikeness. He looked across at Elisabeth and thought he read from her glance that she shared his indignation. And that she should be fated to the same desecration, that indeed he himself should be the man chosen to perform that act of desecration, filled him with such compassion that he longed to steal her away, simply that he might watch before her door, so that undisturbed and unviolated she might dream for ever in a dream of white lace.

Affably conducted back to the ground floor by the ladies, he parted from them with the promise to return soon. In the street he became aware of the emptiness of his visit; he thought how dismayed the ladies would

be if they heard Bertrand talking, and he actually wished that they could hear him for once.

When a man has adopted the habit of not noticing his fellow-creatures—in consequence perhaps of the caste-like seclusion of his life, and of a certain slowness in emotional reaction—he is bound to be surprised at himself if his eye should be attracted and held by two strange young men standing talking together near him. This is what happened to Joachim one evening in the foyer of the Opera House. The two gentlemen were obviously foreigners and not much over twenty; he was inclined to take them for Italians, not merely because of the cut of their clothes which was a little unusual, but because one of them, a black-eyed and black-haired fellow, wore an upward-curling Italian moustache. And although it went against Joachim's grain to listen to the conversation of strangers, he perceived that they were employing a foreign language which was not Italian, and he felt constrained to listen more carefully, until with a slight sensation of alarm he thought he could tell that they were speaking Czech, or more correctly, Bohemian. His alarm was quite unfounded, and still more unfounded seemed to him the feeling of infidelity to Elisabeth which supervened on it. Of course it was possible, if also unlikely, that Ruzena might be in the audience and that these two young men might presently visit her in her box, as he himself had often visited Elisabeth in hers; and perhaps there was really a resemblance between Ruzena and the young man with the little black moustache and the far too curly black head, and not merely in the colour of their hair; probably it was the slightly too small mouth and the lips which stood out too vividly from the olive face, the nose, too short and delicately chiselled, and the smile which was in some way challenging—yes, challenging was the right word—and nevertheless seemed to be asking for forgiveness.

Yet all this seemed preposterous, and it might well be that the resemblance was only a fancy of his; for when he thought of Ruzena now he had to admit to himself that her image had completely faded, indeed that he would not recognize her if he met her again in the street, and that he could see her only through the medium and in the mask of this young man. That reassured him and made the incident in some way safe, but without giving him any feeling of satisfaction, for at the same time and in some other layer of his mind he felt that it was somehow dreadful and unspeakable for the girl to be concealed behind the mask of a man, and even after the interval he could not rid himself of this feeling. They were presenting Gounod's *Faust*, and even the sugary harmonies seemed to him not so fatuous as the operatic convention on the stage, where no one, not even Faust himself, noticed that in the beloved lineaments of Margaret those of Valentine lay concealed, and that it was for this, and this alone, that Margaret had to suffer. Perhaps Mephistopheles knew it, and Joachim was glad that Elisabeth had no brothers. When after the performance he again ran into Ruzena's brother, he was thankful that now the sister too was set beyond his reach, and he felt so sure of himself that, in spite of his uniform, he turned in the direction of Jägerstrasse. And the feeling of infidelity, too, was gone.

It was only when he turned into Friedrichstrasse that he became conscious that he could not visit the casino in his uniform. He was disappointed and continued to walk along Jägerstrasse. What should he do? He turned round the next corner, came back to Jägerstrasse again, and caught himself peeping under the hats of passing girls, often half expecting to hear a few words of Italian. But when he was again approaching the Jäger Casino the voice he heard was not Italian, but hard and staccato. "But you not know me any more?" "Ruzena," Pasenow said reluctantly and thought at the same time: How painful! There he was standing in the open street in his uniform with this girl, he who only a few days ago had been ashamed of being seen with Bertrand in his civilian clothes, and instead of going away he was, forgetting all convention, almost happy, yes, completely happy, simply because the girl was going on talking: "Where is papa to-night? He comes not to-night?" She shouldn't have reminded him of his father: "No, nothing doing to-night, little Ruzena: the"—what had she called him?—"the old gentleman isn't coming to-night either." … Yes, and now he must hurry away. Ruzena gazed at him in dismay: "So long keep me waiting and now not …" But, and her face cleared, he must pay her a visit. He gazed into her apprehensively questioning face as if he wished to print it finally on his mind, but seeking at the same time to discover if her southern brother with the curled moustache was hidden in it. There was some resemblance; but while he was wondering whether a girl who bore her brother in her face could be anything to him, he remembered his own brother, fair-haired and masculine with his short beard, and that brought him back to actuality. Of course that was different; Helmuth was a country gentleman, a huntsman, and had nothing in common with those soft southern people; and yet it was a reassurance. His eyes still searched her face, but his aversion faded and he felt a need to do her a kindness, to say something comforting to her, so that she might cherish a happy memory of him; he still hesitated; no, he would not visit her, but … "But?" the word sounded anxious and expectant. Joachim himself did not know at first what was to follow the "but," and then he suddenly knew: "We could meet somewhere and have lunch together." Yes, yes, yes, yes; she knew a little place: to-morrow! No, it couldn't be to-morrow, but on Wednesday he had leave, and they arranged

to meet on Wednesday. Then she stood on the tips of her toes and whispered into his ear: “You’re good, nice man,” and ran away, and vanished through the door over which the gas-jets were burning. Pasenow saw his father bustling up the stairs with his quick and purposive tread, and his heart contracted perceptibly and very painfully.

Ruzena was enchanted by the conventionally stiff courtesy with which Joachim had treated her in the restaurant, and in her delight she even forgot her disappointment that he had appeared in mufti. It was a cool, rainy day; yet she did not want to give up her programme, and so after lunch they had driven out through Charlottenburg to the Havel. Already in the droshky Ruzena had pulled off one of Joachim’s gloves, and now, as they went along the river-path, she took his arm and pushed it under hers. They went slowly, walking through a landscape expectant in its stillness, and yet which had nothing to expect save the rain and the evening. The sky hung softly over it, sometimes united indissolubly to the earth by a veil of rain, and for them too, wandering through the stillness, there seemed to be nothing left but expectation, and it was as though all the life in them had flowed to their fingers, which, clasped and folded in upon each other, slept like the petals of an unopened bud. Shoulder leaning against shoulder, from the distance resembling the two sides of a triangle, they walked along the river-path in silence, for neither knew what it was that drew them together. But quite unexpectedly while they were walking along Ruzena bent over his hand, which lay in hers, and kissed it before he could draw it away. He looked into eyes that were swimming with tears, and at lips that twitched with sobs, yet managed to say: “When you meet me on stairs I say, Ruzena, I say, he not for you, never for you. And now you here.…” But she did not reach up her mouth for the expected kiss, but fell again, almost greedily, on his hand, and when he tried to free it, bit into it with her teeth, not sharply, but as gently and cautiously as a little dog playing: then looking at the mark contentedly she said: “Now let us walk on again. Rain matters not.” The rain sank quietly into the river, and rustled softly on the leaves of the willows. A boat lay half-sunk near the bank; under a little wooden bridge a runnel poured more rapidly into the placid flow of the river, and Joachim too felt himself being floated away, as though the longing which filled him were a soft, light out-flowing of his heart, a breathing flood longing to be merged in the breath of his beloved, and to be lost as in an ocean of immeasurable peace. It was as though the summer were dissolving, so that the very water seemed light, rustling from the leaves, and hanging on the grasses in clear drops. A soft misty veil rose in the distance, and when they turned round it had closed them in behind, so that in walking they seemed to be standing still. When the rain came on more violently they sought the protection of the trees, beneath which the ground was still dry, a patch of unreleased summer dust almost pitiable in the release of everything around. Ruzena pulled out her hat-pins, not only because their constraint irked her, but also to protect Joachim from their sharp points, took off her hat, and leant her back against him as if he were a protective tree. She had bent back her head, and when he sank his, his lips touched her brow and the dark curls that framed it. He did not see the faint and slightly stupid furrows on her forehead, perhaps because he was too near to distinguish them, perhaps because seeing had melted completely into feeling. But she felt his arms round her, his hands in hers, felt as if she were among the branches of a tree, and his breath on her brow was like the rustling of the rain on the leaves; so motionless did they stand, and so at one was the grey sky with the level waters, that the willows on the little island seemed to float as in a grey insubstantial sea, hanging or resting there, one did not know which. But then she looked at the wet sleeve of her coat and whispered softly that they must turn back.

Yet though now the rain beat on their faces, they dared not hasten, for that would have dispelled the charm, and they only became sure of themselves again when they were drinking coffee in the little inn. Now the rain ran faster and faster down the panes of the rustic veranda, and splashed thinly from the gutters. Whenever the landlady left the room Ruzena set down her cup, took his out of his hand, and seizing his head drew it quite close to hers, so close—and they had not yet kissed—that their glances melted together, and the tension was quite unendurable in its sweetness. But when, as in a dark cave, they sat in the droshky under the covered roof with the rain-flaps let down, the faint soft drumming of the raindrops on the stretched leather above them, seeing nothing of the world save the coachman’s cape and two wet grey strips of roadway through the opening on either side, and soon not even seeing that, then their faces bowed towards each other, met, and melted together, dreaming and flowing like the river, lost irrecoverably, and ever found again, and again sunk tunelessly. It was a kiss that lasted for an hour and fourteen minutes. Then the droshky stopped before Ruzena’s door. Yet when he made to enter with her she shook her head, and he turned to go; but the pain of parting from her was so great that after a few steps he turned back, and driven by his own dread and drawn by hers, seized her hand, which was still motionlessly outstretched in longing; and as if already dreaming they ascended like sleepwalkers the dark stairs, which creaked under their feet, crossed the dark entrance-room, and in her bedroom, which lay in the gloom of

the early rainy twilight, sank on the dark rug that covered the bed, seeking once more the kiss from which they had been torn, their faces wet with rain or with tears, they did not know which. But then Ruzena freed herself and guided his hands to the fastenings that held her dress at the back, and her singing voice was dark. “Open that,” she whispered, tearing at the same time at his necktie and the buttons of his vest. And as if in sudden, precipitate humility, whether towards him or towards God, who can say, she fell on her knees, her head against the foot of the bed, and quickly unfastened his shoes. Oh, how terrible that was—for why should they not sink down together, forgetting the casings in which they were held?—and yet how grateful he was to her that she made it easier, and so touchingly; oh, the deliverance of the smile with which she threw open the bed into which they flung themselves. But the sharp-cornered starched plastron of his shirt, cutting against her chin, still irked her, and opening it and squeezing her face between the sharp angles she ordered: “Put that off”; and now they felt release and freedom, felt the softness of their bodies, felt their breathing stifled by the urgency of emotion, and their delight rising up out of their dread. Oh, dread of life streaming from the living flesh with which the bones are clothed, softness of the skin spread and stretched over it, dreadful warning of the skeleton and the many-ribbed breast frame which he can now embrace, and which, breathing, now presses against him, its heart beating against his. Oh, sweet fragrance of the flesh, humid exhalation, soft runnels beneath the breasts, darkness of the armpits. But still Joachim was too confused, still they were both too confused, to know the delight they felt; they knew only that they were together and yet that they must still seek each other. In the darkness he saw Ruzena’s face, but it seemed to be flowing away, flowing between the dark banks of her hair, and he had to put out his hand to touch it and assure himself that it was there; he found her brow and her eyelids beneath which the hard eyeballs rested, found the satisfying curve of her cheeks and the line of her mouth opened for his kiss. Wave beat against wave of longing; drawn by the flood his kiss found hers; and while the willows of the river grew up and up, stretching from bank to bank, enclosing them as in a sacred grotto in whose profound peace the security of the eternal sea slumbers, it was—so faintly did he say it, stifled and no longer breathing, but only seeking for her breath—it was like a cry that she heard: “I love you”; and she opened, like a shell in the sea she opened, and he sank drowning into her.

Without warning the news reached him that his brother was dead. He had fallen in a duel with a Polish land proprietor. Had it happened a few weeks before Joachim might not have been so shaken. In the twenty years which he had spent away from home the image of his brother had faded more and more, and when he thought of him he saw only the fair-haired lad in his boy’s suit—they had always been dressed alike until Joachim had been sent into the cadet school—and even now the first thing that came into his mind was a child’s coffin. Yet immediately, side by side with it, rose Helmuth’s masculine blond-bearded form, the same form which had come to him that evening in the Jägerstrasse when he had been afraid that he saw something more in a girl’s face than was there: oh, then the clear eyes of the huntsman had rescued him from the nightmare into which another had wished to draw and entangle him, and those eyes which had been lent him then Helmuth had closed now for ever, perhaps in order that he himself might have them always. Had he required this of Helmuth? He had no feeling of guilt, yet it was as if his brother’s death had come about for his sake; yes, as if he had been the cause of it. Strange that Helmuth had worn Uncle Bernhard’s beard, the same short beard which left the mouth free; and now it seemed to Joachim that he had always held Helmuth responsible for the cadet school and his military career, and not Uncle Bernhard who was really to blame. Still, Helmuth had been allowed to stay at home, and besides he had played the hypocrite—that was probably the explanation; yet all this was very confusing, and the more so because Joachim had known for a long time now that his brother’s life was not enviable. He saw the child’s coffin before him again, and a feeling of bitterness against his father rose up in him. So the old man had succeeded at last in driving his other son out of the house too. It gave him an acrid feeling of relief to throw the responsibility for his brother’s death on his father.

He returned to Stolpin for the funeral. When he arrived a letter from Helmuth was awaiting him: “I don’t know whether I shall come alive out of this rather unnecessary affair. Naturally I hope so; still it is almost a matter of indifference to me. I recognize that there is something called a code of honour which in this shoddy life gives a hint of some higher idea to which one may submit oneself. I hope that you have found more value in your life than I have found in mine. I have often envied you your military career; in the army one serves at least something greater than oneself. I don’t know, of course, how you think about it, but I’m writing you to warn you (in case I should fall) not to give up your career for the sake of taking over the estate. You’ll have to do that sooner or later of course, but as long as father is alive it would be better, all things considered, for you to stay away, unless mother should need you. I send you lots of good wishes.” Here followed a varied list of instructions for Joachim to carry out, and at the end, somewhat unexpectedly, the wish that he might be less lonely than Helmuth had been.

His parents were remarkably collected, his mother no less than his father. His father gripped his hand and said: “He died for honour, for the honour of his name,” and with his sharp, purposive stride walked in silence from end to end of the room. Soon he repeated again: “He died for honour,” and went out through the door.

They had laid the coffin in the big drawing-room. In the antechamber Joachim already could smell the heavy perfume of the flowers and wreaths: too heavy for a child’s coffin—a stubborn and meaningless thought—and yet he remained hesitating within the heavily curtained door, and did not dare to look across, but stared at the floor. The floor he knew well, knew the triangular parquet which bordered the threshold, knew the recurring pattern that ran across the room, and when he followed it with his eyes, as he had often done as a child picking his steps along the geometrical figures, his glance reached the black cloth spread under the bier. A few leaves, fallen from the wreaths, were lying there. He had a longing to walk along the pattern again, took a few steps, and looked at the coffin. It was not a child’s coffin, and that was good; but he still shrank from looking with his own seeing eyes into those dead ones, into eyes which must be so completely quenched that the face of the boy would be drowned in them, perhaps drawing himself after it, the brother to whom those eyes had now been given; and the fancy that he himself was lying there grew so strong that it was like a release and piece of good fortune when, stepping nearer, he saw that the coffin was covered. Someone said that the dead man’s face had been mutilated by the bullet. He hardly listened to this, but remained standing beside the coffin, his hand resting on the lid. And seized by the impotence that overcomes human beings in the presence of the dead and the silence of death, where all accepted things recede and fall away, where the long familiar breaks and falls and is frozen in its fall, where the air becomes thin and incapable of supporting one, it seemed to him that he would never be able to move from his station beside the bier, and it caused him a great effort to remember that this was the big drawing-room, and that the coffin was standing in the place usually occupied by the piano, and that behind it there must be a strip of parquet never yet walked on; he went slowly over and touched the black-draped wall, felt under the gloomy hangings the picture-frames and the frame of the case where the Iron Cross hung, and this refound fragment of actuality transformed death in a novel and almost exciting way into a matter of drapery, accommodating almost cheerfully the fact that Helmuth in his coffin, decked with all his flowers, had been introduced into this room like a new piece of furniture, thus once more reducing the incomprehensible so radically to the comprehensible, the certain and assured, that the experience of those few minutes—or had it been only seconds?—passed over into a soothing feeling of quiet confidence. His father appeared accompanied by several gentlemen, and Joachim heard him once more saying repeatedly: “He died for honour.” But when the gentlemen had left and Joachim thought he was alone, suddenly he heard again: “He died for honour,” and saw his father, small and forlorn, standing beside the bier. He felt it his duty to go up to him. “Come, father,” he said, leading him away. At the door his father looked into his face and said: “He died for honour,” as if he wished to learn the words by heart, and wished Joachim also to do so.

Then a great number of people arrived. The village fire brigade were standing in the yard. The neighbouring military associations also put in an appearance, making an orderly show of top-hats and frock-coats on which not infrequently an Iron Cross was to be seen. Carriages from the houses in the vicinity drove up, and while the vehicles were being directed to a place where they could remain in the shade, Joachim had to greet the visitors and do the honours beside his brother’s coffin. Baron von Baddensen arrived alone, for his wife and daughter were still in Berlin, and as Joachim greeted him he was seized by the thought, angrily dismissed at once, that this gentleman might well now regard the only remaining son at Stolpin as a desirable son-in-law, and he felt ashamed for Elisabeth. From the gable of the house a black flag hung motionlessly, almost reaching down to the terrace.

His mother descended the stairs on his father’s arm. The visitors were astonished at her calmness, indeed admired her. But her calmness was probably due simply to the slowness of feeling that characterized her. The funeral procession formed up, and as the carriages turned into the village street, and the house of God lay before them, everyone was heartily glad that they could now step out of the dust and heat of the afternoon sun, which had burned fiercely on their thick mourning-suits and uniforms, into the cool white church. The pastor gave an address in which the quality of honour was much stressed and by adroit turns linked with the honour that is due to God: to the pealing of the organ their voices rose, acknowledging that from our loved ones we must part … with pain and smart, and Joachim kept waiting for the rhyme to see that it came. Then on foot they proceeded to the cemetery, over whose portal glittered in golden letters: “Rest in Peace,” and the equipages followed slowly in a long-stretching cloud of dust. The sunny sky arched, a violet-blue, over the dry, crumbling earth that was waiting for them to give Helmuth’s body into its keeping; though indeed it was not the earth, but only the family vault, a little open cellar, that was yawning as if in boredom for the newcomer. When Joachim had three times emptied the little spade into

the hole he looked down, saw the ends of his grandfather's and his uncle's coffins, and thought that it was because they had to keep a place for his father that they had not buried Uncle Bernhard here. But then as the shovelled earth fell on the lid of Helmuth's coffin and the stony sides of the tomb, standing there with the toy shovel in his hand he could not help thinking of days spent as a child in the soft river-sand, and he saw his brother again as a boy, saw himself lying on the bier, and it seemed to him that the dryness of this summer day was cheating Helmuth not only out of his parents, but out of death itself. For Joachim thought of a soft rainy day for his own death, a day in which the heavens themselves would sink to receive his soul, so that it might flow away as in Ruzena's arms. Unchaste thoughts, out of place here, but it was not he alone who was responsible for them, but all the others to whom now he gave place at the graveside, yes, even his father shared in the blame for them: for all their religion was a sham, was brittle and dusty and at the mercy of the sun and the rain. Could one not almost wish for the negro host, so that they might sweep all this away, and the Saviour might arise in new glory and lead men back to His kingdom? A Christ hung on the marble cross over the tomb, clothed only with the rag that covered His loins and the crown of thorns from which the bronze blood-drops fell, and Joachim too felt drops on his cheeks; perhaps they were tears that he had not noticed, perhaps however it was only the oppressive heat; he did not know, and went on shaking the hands that were held out to him.

The military associations and the fire brigade had accorded the dead man the last honour of a march past and a sharp leftward turn of their heads; their boots rang sharply on the gravel of the path, and four abreast they marched stiffly out through the cemetery gates to the curt, military commands of their officer. Standing on the steps of the family vault, Herr von Pasenow with his hat in his hand, Joachim with his hand to his cap, Frau von Pasenow between them, they acknowledged the march past. The other soldiers present stood at attention with their hands raised in salute. Thereupon the equipages advanced, and Joachim and his parents stepped into their carriage, whose door-handle and other silver furnishings, no less than the silver of the harness, had been carefully covered with *crêpe* by the coachman; Joachim assured himself that the very whip had been decorated with a *crêpe* rosette. Now his mother was crying, and Joachim, who could think of nothing to say to comfort her, once more could not comprehend why it should have been Helmuth, and not himself, who had been hit by the fatal bullet. But his father sat stiffly on the black-leather seat, which was not hard and tattered like the seats of the Berlin droshkies, but flexible and well quilted with leather buttons. Several times his father seemed on the point of saying something, something to sum up the line of thought that obviously occupied and completely absorbed him, for he made as if to speak, but then fell into blank silence again, only moving his lips soundlessly; at last he said sharply: "They have accorded him the last honours," lifted one finger as if he were waiting for something more, or wished to add something, then laid his hand back palm downwards on his knee again. Between the end of his black glove and his cuff with its great black cuff-link a strip of reddish-haired skin was visible.

The next few days passed in silence. Frau von Pasenow went about her business; she was in the byre at milking time, in the hen-house when the eggs were collected, in the laundry. Joachim rode out a few times into the fields; it was the horse that he had given to Helmuth, and to take it out now was like a service of love to the dead. At evening the yard was swept and the servants sat on the benches before their wing enjoying the soft, cool breeze. Once during the night there was a thunderstorm, and Joachim realized with alarm that he had almost forgotten Ruzena. He had seen little of his father, who sat for the most part in his study reading the letters of condolence or registering them in a book. The pastor, who now arrived every day, often staying for dinner, was the only one who spoke of the dead, but as he brought out only a sort of professional platitudes they were but little regarded, and his only listener seemed to be Herr von Pasenow, for he now and then nodded his head and seemed on the point of saying something that lay very urgently on his mind; but he always finished merely by repeating the pastor's last few words with a nod to emphasize them, as for instance: "Ay, ay, Herr Pastor, sorely tried parents."

Then Joachim had to leave for Berlin. When he went to say good-bye to his father the old man began again to march up and down. Joachim remembered countless similar good-byes in this room which he disliked so much, well as he knew it, with the hunt trophies on the walls, the spittoon in the corner beside the stove, the writing equipment on the desk, which probably had stood as it was now since his grandfather's time, the pile of sport journals on the table, most of them uncut. He waited for his father to stick his monocle in his eye as usual and dismiss him with a curt: "Well, a pleasant journey, Joachim." But this time his father said nothing, but only continued to walk up and down, his hands behind his back, so that Joachim got up a second time. "Really, father, I must be going now, or I'll miss my train." "Well, a pleasant journey, Joachim," the accustomed reply came at last, "but there's something I want to say to you. I'm afraid you'll have to come here for good soon. The place has become empty, yes, empty …" he looked round him … "but some people don't see that … of course one must maintain one's honour …" he had

begun his walk again, then, confidentially: “And what about Elisabeth? We spoke about it before.…” “Father, it’s high time I was away,” said Joachim, “else I’ll lose my train.” The old man held out his hand, and Joachim took it unwillingly.

As he drove through the village he saw from the church clock that he was still in ample time for the train; indeed he had known that before. The church door chancing to be open, he ordered the coachman to stop. He had an offence to wipe off, an offence against the church which had been merely a pleasantly cool place to him, against the pastor to whose well-meaning words he had not listened, against Helmuth whose burial he had dishonoured with profane thoughts; in a word, an offence against God. He entered and tried to recapture the feelings which as a child had been his when every Sunday he had stood here as before the face of God. At that time he had known a great number of hymns, and had sung them with ardour. But it would hardly do for him to begin singing now quite by himself, in the church. He must confine himself to assembling his thoughts and concentrating them on God and his own sinfulness, his littleness and wretchedness before God. But his thoughts refused to seek God. The only thing that came into his mind was a sentence from Isaiah which he had once heard in this place: “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.” Yes, Bertrand was right, they had lost their faith; and now he tried to say the Lord’s Prayer with closed eyes, being careful not to utter a single word emptily, but to grasp the meaning of each; and when he came to the words, “as we forgive our debtors,” the tender, apprehensive and yet trustful feelings of his childhood rose in him again; he remembered that he had always applied this passage to his father and from it had drawn the confidence that he would be able to forgive his father, yes, to feel all the love towards him which it was the duty of a child to feel; and now he remembered again that the old man had spoken of his loneliness, of which he was visibly afraid, and which one must make lighter for him. As Joachim left the church the words “uplifted and strengthened” came into his mind, and they did not seem empty to him, but full of new and encouraging meaning. He resolved to visit Elisabeth.

In the carriage the phrase arose in his mind again, again he thought “uplifted and strengthened,” but now it was associated with the image of a starched[1] shirt-front and the joyful expectation of seeing Ruzena again.

[1] In German the same word serves for “strengthened” and “starched.”

II

A pedestrian was coming from the direction of Königstrasse. He was corpulent and square-built, indeed actually squat, and everything about him was so extraordinarily soft that one might have fancied that he was poured into his clothes every morning. He was a serious pedestrian, he wore a grey-lustre coat over his trousers of black cloth, and his chest was covered with a brown beard. He was obviously in a hurry, yet his walk was not rapid and undeviating, but a sort of purposive waddle such as suited a soft-bodied purposive man who was in a hurry. But it was not only the beard that concealed his face; he wore eyeglasses as well, through which he shot severe glances at the passers-by; and it was literally impossible to picture to oneself that a man like this, waddling with such haste in pursuit of some urgent business and shooting out such sharp and severe glances in spite of his soft appearance, was probably a kind and affectionate fellow in some other sphere of his existence, and that there must be women to whom he unbent in love, women and children to whom the beard uncovered a kindly smile, women who might dare to seek in a kiss the rosy lips in their dark-bearded cave.

When Joachim caught sight of this man he had mechanically followed him. It did not matter to him in any case where he went. Since he had learned that Bertrand had a Berlin agent for his firm, and that the office was in one of the streets between the Alexanderplatz and the Stock Exchange, he had sometimes felt drawn to this neighbourhood as formerly he had felt drawn to the working-class suburb—and the fact that he no longer had any need to look for Ruzena out there was almost like a promotion for her. But he did not come here, all the same, on the chance of meeting Bertrand: on the contrary he avoided the place whenever he knew Bertrand was in Berlin, nor indeed had he any interest in Bertrand’s agent. It was simply so strange to him that these should be the surroundings in which one had to picture Bertrand’s real life; and when he walked through those streets it sometimes happened that he not only scrutinized the fronts of the houses, as if to discover what offices were concealed behind them, but even peeped under the hats of the civilians as if they were women. Sometimes he wondered at this himself, for he was unaware that he searched these faces to discover whether their existence was so totally different from his own, and whether they could give him a clue to any qualities that Bertrand might have adopted from them, but still kept concealed. Yes, the

secrecy of this life of theirs was so complete that they did not even need beards to hide themselves behind. Indeed they would have looked a little more confidential and less hypocritical to him if they had worn beards, and this may have been one of the reasons why he sauntered in the wake of the fat, hurrying man. Suddenly it seemed to him that the man in front of him fitted very strangely the picture he had always had of Bertrand's agent. It was silly, perhaps, but when several passers-by greeted the man Joachim was quite delighted that Bertrand's agent should enjoy so much respect. He would not have been excessively surprised if Bertrand himself, melodramatically transformed, small and corpulent and full-bearded, had waddled up to him: for why should Bertrand have preserved his former external appearance, seeing that he had slipped into a different world? And even though Joachim knew that what he thought was without sense or sequence, yet it was as though the apparently confused skein concealed a sequence: one had only to disentangle the threads which bound Ruzena to these people and find this deeper and very secret knot—and perhaps an end of one thread had lain in his hand that time when he had divined Bertrand as Ruzena's real lover; but now his hand was empty, and all that he had to go on was that Bertrand had once excused himself on the plea that he had to spend the evening with a business friend, and Joachim could not rid himself of the idea that this man had been the business friend. Probably they had both gone to the Jäger Casino, and the man had stuck a fifty-mark note into Ruzena's hand.

When a man follows another in the street, even if it is only mechanically and with ostensible indifference, he will soon find himself attaching all sorts of wishes, benevolent and malevolent, to the man he is following. Probably he will want at least to see the man's face and wish that he should turn round, even though since his brother's death he has thought himself invulnerable against the temptation to seek in every half-feared face the face of his mistress. In any case there is nothing to explain why the sudden thought should have come to Joachim that the erect bearing of all the people here in this street was quite unjustified, that it was incompatible with their better knowledge, or due merely to an abysmal unawareness that some time all their bodies would have to stretch themselves out in death. And yet the walk of the man in front was not in the least sharp, rapid or headlong, nor was there any fear that he might fall and break one of his legs, for he was far too soft for that to happen.

Now the man had stopped at the corner of Rochstrasse as if he were waiting for something; it was possible that he was waiting to get the fifty marks back from Joachim. And Joachim was really in honour bound to give them back, and suddenly he felt a hot rush of shame at the thought that, for fear lest people might think he kept a paid woman, or because if he stopped to reflect on it he might begin to doubt Ruzena's love, he had left her in her old hateful employment; and it was as if the scales had fallen from his eyes: he, a Prussian officer, was the secret lover of a woman who accepted money from other men. An offence against honour could be wiped out only by a pistol bullet, yet before he could think this out, with all its dreadful consequences, the knowledge swam up, swam up like an image of Bertrand, that the man was crossing Rochstrasse and that Joachim must not let him out of sight until he … yes, until he … that was not so easy to get right. Bertrand had it easy; he belonged to this world and the other as well, and Ruzena too had a foot in each world. Was that the reason why they by rights belonged to each other? But now his thoughts jostled each other like the people in the crowd round about him, and even though he saw a goal in front of him which he wanted them to reach, it swam and wavered and was lost to view like the back of the fat man before him. If he had stolen Ruzena from her legitimate possessor, then it was perhaps fitting that he should keep her hidden now as his stolen property. He tried to maintain a stiff and erect bearing, and no longer to look at the civilians. The dense crowd around him, the hubbub, as the Baroness called it, all this commercial turmoil full of faces and backs, seemed to him a soft, gliding, dissolving mass which one could not lay hold on. What did it all lead to? And with a jerk regaining his prescribed military bearing, he suddenly thought with relief that one could love only someone who belonged to an alien world. That was why he would never dare to love Elisabeth, and also why Ruzena had to be a Bohemian. Love meant to take refuge from one's own world in another's, and so in spite of his jealousy and shame he had left Ruzena in her world, so that her flight to him should be ever sweet and new. The garrison band was playing a little in front of him, and he held himself still more stiffly, as stiffly as when he attended church parade on Sundays. At the corner of Spandauerstrasse the man slowed down and hesitated at the edge of the thoroughfare; evidently a business man like this was afraid of the horses in the roadway. It was of course silly, the idea that he must refund money to this man; but Ruzena must be taken out of the casino, that was definite. In any case she would always remain a Bohemian, a being out of another world. But where did he fit in himself? Whither was he sliding? And Bertrand? Again Bertrand rose before him, astonishingly soft and small, glancing severely through his eyeglasses, strange to Joachim, strange to Ruzena who was a Bohemian, strange to Elisabeth who walked in a still park, strange to them all, and yet familiar when he turned round and the beard parted in a friendly smile, inciting women to kiss the dark cave where his mouth was concealed. His hand on his sword-hilt, Joachim remained standing as if the nearness of the

garrison band provided him with protection and new strength against the Evil One. Bertrand's image arose, iridescent, uncanny. It emerged and vanished again: "vanished in the labyrinth of the city," the words came back to Joachim, and "labyrinth" had a diabolically underworld ring. Bertrand was concealed in all those shapes, and he had betrayed everybody: Joachim, his fellow-officers, the women, everybody. But now he noticed that Bertrand's representative had crossed Spandauerstrasse in good style at a sharp trot. Joachim thought with relief that henceforth he would keep Ruzena out of reach of them both. No, he could not be accused of stealing Ruzena; on the contrary it was his duty to protect Elisabeth as well from Bertrand. Oh, he knew, the Devil was full of wiles. But a soldier must never fly. If he fled he would deliver Elisabeth defencelessly to that man, he would himself be one of those who hid in the labyrinth of the city and were afraid of the horses' hoofs; and it would be not only an avowal of his guilt as a thief, it would mean also the renunciation for ever of his attempt to tear from that man the secret of his treachery. He must follow him farther, yet not surreptitiously like a spy, but openly as was fitting; and he would not keep Ruzena concealed either. So in the middle of the Stock Exchange quarter, though admittedly in the vicinity of the garrison band too, everything suddenly grew quiet round Joachim von Pasenow, as quiet and transparent as the clear blue sky which looked down between the two rows of buildings.

He had now a somewhat vague, yet urgent, wish to catch up the man and tell him that he was going to take Ruzena out of the casino and from now on make no secret about her; but he had taken only a few steps when he saw the other waddling hastily into the Stock Exchange. For a moment Joachim remained staring at the entrance: was this the place of metamorphosis? Would Bertrand himself come out now? He considered whether he should take Bertrand at once to meet Ruzena, and decided no: for Bertrand belonged to the world of the night clubs, and it was from that very world that he must now rescue Ruzena. But that would come all right; and how lovely it would be to forget all about it and wander with Ruzena in a still park beside a still lake. He stood still in front of the Stock Exchange. He longed for the country. The traffic roared round him; above him thundered the trains. He no longer stared at the passers-by, even though he felt that they were foreign and strange. He would avoid this neighbourhood in future. In the midst of the hubbub round the Stock Exchange Joachim von Pasenow held himself stiff and erect. He would be very good to Ruzena.

Bertrand paid him a visit of condolence, and Joachim was again not quite clear whether to regard this as considerate or presumptuous: one could take it as the one or the other. Bertrand remembered Helmuth, who had visited Culm occasionally, though seldom enough, and his memory was extraordinarily exact: "Yes, a fair, quiet youth, very reserved … I fancy he envied us … he couldn't have changed much later either … and he resembled you." That, now, was just a little too familiar again, almost as if Bertrand wished to exploit Helmuth's death for his own advantage; however, it was no wonder if Bertrand remembered all that had to do with his former military career with such astonishing exactitude: one liked to recall happy times that one had lost. Yet Bertrand did not speak at all in a sentimental way, but quietly and soberly, so that Helmuth's death assumed a more human and natural aspect, and in some way, under Bertrand's touch, became objective, timeless and endurable. To his brother's duel Joachim had not really devoted much thought; all the opinions that had been pronounced on it and the comments recurring again and again in the letters of condolence pointed in the same direction: that Helmuth had been tragically caught by the unalterable fatality of his sense of honour, from which there was no escape. Bertrand however began:

"The most extraordinary thing is that we live in a world of machinery and railways, and that at the same time as the railways are running and the factories working two people can stand opposite each other and shoot at each other."

Bertrand had no sense of honour left, Joachim told himself, and yet his remarks seemed natural and illuminating. But Bertrand went on:

"That may be, of course, because it's a question of sentiment."

"The sentiment of honour," said Joachim.

"Yes, honour and so forth."

Joachim looked up—was Bertrand laughing at him again? He would have liked to reply that one must not judge such things merely from the standpoint of the city man; out there in the country people's feelings were less artificial and meant more. Really Bertrand did not know anything about it. But of course one could not say such things to one's guest, and Joachim silently held out his cigar-case. But Bertrand drew his English pipe and leather tobacco-pouch from his pocket:

"It's extraordinary that it should be the most superficial and perishable things that are actually the most persistent. Physically a human being can adapt himself with incredible quickness to new conditions of life. But even his skin and the colour of his hair are more persistent than his bony structure."

Joachim regarded Bertrand's fair skin and far too wavy hair and waited to see where all this was going to lead.

Bertrand noticed at once that he had not made himself clear enough:

"Well, the most persistent things in us are, let us say, our so-called feelings. We carry an indestructible fund of conservatism about with us. I mean our feelings, or rather conventions of feeling, for actually they aren't living feelings, but atavisms."

"So you consider that conservative principles are atavistic?"

"Oh, sometimes, but not always. However, I wasn't really thinking of them. What I meant was that our feelings always lag half-a-century or a full century behind our actual lives. One's feelings are always less human than the society one lives in. Just consider that a Lessing or a Voltaire accepted without question the fact that in their time men were still broken on the wheel—a thing that to us with our feelings is unimaginable. And do you imagine that we are in a different case?"

Well, Joachim had never bothered his head over such things. Perhaps Bertrand was right. But why was he saying all this to him? He was talking like a writer for the newspapers.

Bertrand went on:

"We take it quite as a matter of course that two men, both of them honourable—for your brother would not have fought with a man who was not honourable—should of a morning stand and shoot at each other. And the fact that we put up with such a thing, and that they do it, shows how completely imprisoned we all are in conventional feeling. But feelings are inert, and that's why they're so cruel. The world is ruled by the inertia of feeling."

The inertia of feeling! Joachim was struck by the phrase: was he not himself full of inertia, was it not a criminal inertia that had prevented him from summoning enough imagination to provide Ruzena with money in spite of her objections, and to take her out of the casino? He asked in alarm:

"Do you actually describe honour as inertia of feeling?"

"Oh, Pasenow, you ask too embarrassing questions." Bertrand had assumed again the winning smile with which he always bridged over differences of opinion. "It seems to me that honour is a very living feeling, but none the less all obsolete forms are full of inertia, and one has to be very tired oneself to give oneself over to a dead and romantic convention of feeling. One has to be in despair and see no way out before one can do that…."

Yes, Helmuth had been tired. But what did Bertrand want? How was one to rid oneself of convention? With dismay Joachim saw the danger that like Bertrand one might begin to let everything slide if one began to transgress convention. Certainly in his connection with Ruzena he had already slipped through convention in the strict sense, but now he must not go any further, and honour itself demanded that he should be true to Ruzena! Perhaps Helmuth had vaguely surmised this when he warned him against returning to the estate. For then Ruzena would be lost. So he asked abruptly: "What do you think of the state of German agriculture?" almost hoping that Bertrand, who always had practical reasons for what he said, would also warn him against taking over the estate.

"Hard to say, Pasenow, especially for anyone who knows so little about agriculture as myself…. Of course we still have the feudal prejudice that, as we all live on God's earth, those who cultivate it have the most stable existence." Bertrand made a slightly disdainful gesture, and Joachim von Pasenow felt disappointed, yet relieved as well, at the thought that he belonged to this favoured caste, while Bertrand's insecure business existence was only, as it were, a preliminary step to a more stable life. Apparently he regretted after all that he had quitted the regiment; as an officer in the Guards he could easily have married an estate. But that was a reflection worthy of his father himself, and Joachim dismissed it and merely asked whether Bertrand intended to adopt a settled life later on. No, Bertrand thought he would hardly be able to do that now: he wasn't a man who could endure living in one place for very long. And then they talked about Stolpin and the shooting there, and Joachim invited Bertrand to come down for the shooting in autumn. And suddenly the door-bell rang: Ruzena! Joachim thought, and he looked at Bertrand almost with hostility. Bertrand had been sitting there now for two hours, drinking tea and smoking, and his visit could no longer, by any stretch, be called a mere visit of condolence. Yet at the same time Joachim had to admit that it had been himself who had pointed to the armchair and produced the cigars and induced Bertrand to stay, although he should have known that Ruzena would be certain to come. Of course now that the thing had happened there was no turning back: naturally it would have been more in order if he had consulted Ruzena first. She would probably feel put out, probably she herself desired the secrecy which he was now preparing to infringe, perhaps in her simple goodness she wished to avoid any chance of her disgracing him—perhaps, indeed, she wasn't quite equal to social occasions; but he was no longer capable of judging that, for when he tried to call up her image all that he saw was her face and her loosened hair on the pillow beside him. He remembered the fragrance of her body, but could hardly tell any longer how she looked

when she was dressed. Well, after all Bertrand was a civilian, and himself wore his hair too long, and so it could not matter very much to him. So Joachim said: “Look here, Bertrand, I’m just having a visit from a nice girl; may I invite you to have supper with us?” “How romantic!” replied Bertrand; of course he would be delighted if he was not in the way.

Joachim went out to greet Ruzena and prepare her for the news. She was visibly disconcerted to find a stranger present. But she was amiable to Bertrand, and Bertrand was amiable to her. Joachim indeed was displeased by the assumption of friendliness with which they treated each other. It was decided that they should dine at home; the valet was sent out for ham and wine, and Ruzena ran after him; he was to bring apple-tarts and cream too. She was delighted to be allowed to preside in the kitchen and make potato-puffs. A little later she called Joachim out to the kitchen; he thought at first that she only wanted to show herself in her huge white apron, the cooking-spoon in her hand, and was preparing to appreciate this touching picture of housewifely loveliness; but she was leaning against the kitchen door sobbing; it was almost like another occasion when as a little boy he had gone to the great kitchen to seek his mother, and one of the maids—probably she had just been given notice—was sobbing so bitterly that he longed to cry with her, but was restrained by a feeling of shame. “Now you not love me no more,” Ruzena sobbed on his shoulder, and although they kissed each other more passionately than ever, she would not be comforted. “Is finished, I know, is finished …” she kept on repeating, “but go back now, must cook.” She dried her tears and smiled. But he went back unwillingly, and it was unwillingly that he thought of Bertrand in the other room; of course it was childish of her, childish to think that their love was finished simply because of Bertrand, yet nevertheless it was real feminine instinct, yes, real feminine instinct, one couldn’t call it anything else, and Joachim felt suddenly dejected. For even though Bertrand in his cynical way received him with the words, “She’s charming,” and awakened in him the grateful pride of King Candaules, the menacing thought remained unshaken: if he went back to Stolpin Ruzena would be lost to him, and then it would all be over. If Bertrand had only dissuaded him at least from having anything to do with agriculture! Or did Bertrand want—and perhaps even against his own convictions—to force him into a country life simply to get him out of Berlin and then win Ruzena, whom in spite of everything he probably regarded as his legitimate property? But that was unthinkable.

Ruzena, followed by the valet, entered with the big tray. She had taken off her apron, and sitting between the two men at the little round table played the grand lady, and in her sing-song, staccato voice made conversation with Bertrand, whom she encouraged to talk of his travels. The two windows were standing open, but in spite of the dark summer night outside, the soft paraffin lamp over the table reminded Joachim of winter and Christmas and the security of the little living-rooms behind the shops. How strange that he should have forgotten all about the lace handkerchiefs which, in a fit of vague longing, he had bought for Ruzena that evening! They were still lying in the chest of drawers, and he would give them to her now if Bertrand were not here and if she were not listening so intently to those stories about the cotton plantations and the poor negroes whose fathers were still slaves—yes, really, actual slaves whom one could sell. What? Were the girls sold too? Ruzena shuddered and Bertrand laughed, laughed easily and pleasantly: “Oh, you mustn’t be afraid, little slave-girl, nothing will happen to you.” Why did Bertrand say that? Was he hinting at buying Ruzena or getting her as a gift? Joachim could not but think of the resemblance between slave and Slav and reflected that all negroes were alike, so that one could hardly tell one from another, and it seemed to him again that Bertrand was trying to entangle him in a maze and to remind him that Ruzena could not be distinguished from her Italian-Slav brother. Was that why Bertrand had conjured up the picture of the black hordes? But Bertrand was only smiling at him, and he was fair, almost as fair as Helmuth, though without the beard, and his hair was wavy, far too wavy, instead of being brushed stiffly back; and for a moment everything was confused again and one did not know to whom Ruzena belonged by rights. If the bullet had found him instead of his brother, then Helmuth would have been sitting here in his place, and Helmuth would also have had the strength to protect Elisabeth. Perhaps Ruzena would have been a little beneath Helmuth; all the same he himself was nothing more than his brother’s deputy. Joachim was dismayed when this became clear to him, dismayed at the thought that one individual could deputize for another, that Bertrand should have a soft little bearded deputy, and that from this standpoint even his father’s ideas were excusable: for why Ruzena in particular, why himself in particular? why not Elisabeth when it came to that? it was all indifferent in some way or other, and he understood the feeling of weariness that had driven Helmuth to his death. Even if Ruzena was right and their love was nearing its end, yet now suddenly everything had receded to a great distance in which Ruzena’s face and Bertrand’s could scarcely be told from each other. The convention of feeling, Bertrand had called it.

Ruzena, on the other hand, seemed to have forgotten her gloomy prophecies. She had felt for Joachim’s hand under the table, and when in panic good breeding, and with a side-glance at Bertrand, he had found safety for it on the open publicity of the brightly lit tablecloth, Ruzena seized it again and fondled it; and

Joachim, once more happy in that possessive caress, overcame his shame with a slight effort and held her hand in his, so that it could be seen quite publicly that they belonged by right to each other. And besides they were not doing anything wrong; for in the Bible it said that when a brother died without leaving children his wife must not marry a stranger, but must take the brother of her dead husband. Yes, it had been something like that anyway, and it was absurd to think that he could betray Helmuth with a woman. But then Bertrand tapped on his glass and proposed a little toast, and once more one did not know whether he intended it seriously or whether he was joking or whether the few glasses of champagne had been already too much for him, so extraordinarily difficult to understand was his speech; in which he spoke of the German housewife, who was most charming when she was an imitation housewife, for play was the true reality of this life, for which reason art was always more beautiful than nature, peasant costume better at a ball than in a village, and the home of a German soldier complete only when, escaping from its accustomed austerity, although violated, no doubt, by the presence of a traditionless man of business, it was at the same time consecrated by the presence of the loveliest of Bohemian ladies; and so he asked the company to drink to the health of their beautiful hostess. Yes, that was all somewhat obscure and insidious, and one could not rightly tell whether all this play on the idea of *imitation* might not mean much the same as he himself had meant by deputizing; but as Bertrand continued to gaze at Ruzena very kindly in spite of the somewhat ironical expression round his lips, one knew that it was intended as a compliment to her and that one could dismiss all those puzzling thoughts; and the supper finished in a mood of general and pleasant gaiety.

Later they insisted on accompanying Bertrand to his lodgings, partly perhaps because they did not wish it to be too obvious that Ruzena was spending the night with Joachim. Ruzena in the middle, they walked through the quiet streets, all three separately, for Joachim did not dare to offer his arm to her. When Bertrand had disappeared behind the door of his lodgings they looked at each other, and Ruzena asked very seriously and humbly: “Will you see me to the casino?” He noticed the sadness and seriousness in her voice, but he felt in response only a weary indifference, and almost found himself replying as seriously in the affirmative, and could at that moment have said good-bye for ever to her; and if Bertrand had come back to lead her away Joachim could even have borne that. Nevertheless the thought of the casino was unendurable. And ashamed that he needed such a spur, yet almost glad of it too, he took her arm in silence. That night they loved each other more passionately than ever. Nevertheless Joachim forgot this time also to give Ruzena her lace handkerchiefs.

Every day when the little one-horse mail-van returned from the train and drew up at the village post office, a messenger from the estate was already leaning against the counter; true, he was only a private messenger, yet he belonged to the post office and had himself become an official in a sense, perhaps indeed with a superior status to the two actual officials there, not however because of any personal qualifications, even though he might have grown grey in service, but simply because he came from the big house and his dignity was a prescriptive fact which had already existed for many decades, and certainly reached back to the time when there was not yet any State postal service, nothing but a post-chaise that drove infrequently through the village and left the letters at the inn. The great black post-bag whose straps had worn a diagonal stripe across the shoulders of the servant’s coat had survived many messengers, and certainly it too must have dated from that long-dead and perhaps happier time; for even the oldest man in the village could remember since his earliest childhood the post-bag hanging on its hook and the messenger leaning against the counter; and by interrogating their memory the old people could count up all the estate messengers who had gaily taken the road with the diagonal stripe on their jackets and were now all resting in the churchyard. So the post-bag was older and more venerable than the new-fashioned post office which had been opened after 1848, that stormy year, older than the hook which, as a mark of respect for the post-bag, or as a final act of official homage to the people at the big house, had been hammered in there when the post office was opened, fixed there also, perhaps, as a reminder that in spite of the violence of progress old customs were not to be forgotten. For in the new post office the old custom of giving preference to the letters for the big house was still maintained, and is probably maintained to this day. So when the coachman came in with the greyish brown mail-bag, and with that disdainful gesture which expresses an ordinary coachman’s attitude to mail-bags threw it on the worn counter, the postmaster, who knew better the respect due to human and official customs, unloosed with scarcely concealed solemnity the seal and the fastenings, and arranged the confusion of packets in little piles according to their size, so as to look through them and separate them more expeditiously: then, all this having been accomplished in good order, the first thing that he did was always to put on one side the letters for the big house, and, before attending to anything else, to take a key from his desk and walk over to the post-bag hanging on its hook with its metal-plated mouth silently contemplating this procedure; then, inserting the key in the middle of the metal plate, he threw open the bag, which gaped at him, shamelessly showing its grey-canvas lining, and hurriedly, as if

he could no longer endure the sight of that gaping canvas maw, he slipped in the letters and newspapers and also the smaller packets, gave the lower jaw of the bag a little push so that it snapped shut, turned the key again, and put it back in his desk. But now the messenger, who till then had remained a mere spectator, lifted up the heavy post-bag, slung it by its hard, worn strap over his shoulders, took the bigger parcels in his hand, and in this way brought the mail one or two hours sooner to the big house than the postman, who had to traverse the whole village first, could have done; a remarkably expeditious method which ensured that, by means of the messenger and the post-bag, an old tradition was continued, and also the practical needs of the gentry and the servants on the estate well looked after.

Joachim now received news from his home oftener than before; for the most part his father sent him curt accounts of what was happening in a sloping, running hand which reminded one so strongly of his walk that it, too, might actually be called three-legged. Joachim was informed of the visits that his parents had received, the shooting and harvest prospects, also a few particulars about the state of the crops; and generally the letters ended with the sentence: “It would be advisable for you to make preparations as soon as possible for returning here, for it is preferable that you should work yourself in sooner rather than later, and everything takes time.—Your loving Father.” Joachim still felt his old dislike for this handwriting, and he read these letters with a more exacerbated inattention than usual, for each admonition that he should quit the service and return to his home was like an attempt to drag him down into a civilian and insecure existence, pretty much, indeed, as if one were to rob him of his uniform and fling him naked into the Alexanderplatz, so that all those strange and busy people could rub shoulders with him. Well, let them call it inertia of feeling; all the same he wasn’t a coward, and he would face calmly the revolver of an opponent, or march out gladly against the traditional enemy, France; but the dangers of a civilian life were of a more obscure and incomprehensible kind. Chaos and disorder everywhere, without a hierarchy, without discipline, and, yes, even without punctuality. When on his way from his flat to the barracks he passed Borsig’s machine factory at the start or the finish of the day’s work, and saw the workers standing before the factory gates like an exotic, dun-coloured race, much the same as the people of Bohemia, he was aware of their sinister looks, and when one or the other tugged at a black-leather cap in greeting, he never dared to respond, for he was afraid of branding the friendly workmen as turncoats, as men who had come over to his side. For he felt that those who hated him were justified, perhaps partly because he divined that they would hate Bertrand, in spite of his civilian clothes, no less than himself. There was something of that too lurking in Ruzena’s aversion to Bertrand. All this was disturbing and confusing, and to Joachim it was as though his ship had sprung a leak which people were urging him to widen. But what seemed completely absurd to him was his father’s demand that he should quit the service for Elisabeth’s sake; for if there was one thing that could make a man worthy of her it was the distinction of being superior, in outward attire at least, to all the impurity and disorder of life; to rob him of his uniform, therefore, was to degrade Elisabeth. So he pushed aside as an importunate and dangerous exaction all thought of a civilian life or a life at home, yet to avoid flat disobedience to his father he appeared at the station with a bouquet of flowers when Elisabeth and her mother left for their summer stay at Lestow.

The conductor in front of the waiting train stood at attention when he caught sight of Joachim, and there was a silent understanding between the two men, an understanding in the eye of the trusty subordinate that he was to look after the ladies of his superior. And although it was a slight violation of good manners to leave the Baroness alone in her carriage, where she was installed with her maid and her luggage, yet when Elisabeth expressed a wish to walk along the train until the bell rang Joachim felt that it was a friendly mark of distinction. They walked up and down on the firmly trampled soil between the lines, and when they passed the open door of the carriage Joachim did not omit to glance up with a slight bow, while the Baroness smiled down at him. Elisabeth said how much she was looking forward to being home again, and that she absolutely counted on seeing him often at Lestow during his furlough, which of course he would spend as usual—and this sad year especially—with his parents. She was wearing a short English travelling suit of light grey cloth, and the blue travelling veil which covered her little hat went well with the colour of her costume. It was almost a matter of surprise to him that a creature who always seemed so thoughtful should be able to summon the trifling interest, the frivolous taste, necessary to choose advantageous clothes, particularly as he guessed that the grey of the costume and the blue of the veil had probably been selected to suit the colour of her eyes, which alternated between a serious grey and a merry blue. But it was difficult to put this thought into words, and so Joachim was glad when the bell signalled and the conductor asked the passengers to take their places. Elisabeth put her foot on the foot-board, and by adroitly half-turning her body to continue her conversation with Joachim avoided providing the horrid spectacle of a lady bent forward clambering into her compartment; yet when she reached the top step it could no longer be helped, and she stooped resolutely through the low door. Now Joachim was standing beside the train

with his face raised towards her, and the thought of his father whom he had looked up to in the same place not so long ago got entangled so strangely with his glimpse of the tails of Elisabeth's grey jacket and the marriage project which his father had hinted at in such unsavoury terms, that the very name of this girl with the grey-blue eyes and the grey jacket, though he saw her physically above him in the carriage-door, suddenly seemed irrelevant and, as it were, effaced from his memory, submerged horribly and surprisingly in his amazed indignation that there should be men like his father who in their depravity had the brazenness to apportion a pure creature like this for her lifetime to some man who would both humiliate and desecrate her. But clearly as he had recognized her as a woman at the moment of her resolute entry into the carriage, he painfully recognized at the same moment that he could not expect from her the sweetness of his nights with Ruzena, neither their glowing passion, nor their twilight dreaminess, but a serious, perhaps religious submission, unimaginable to him not only because it had to happen without either travelling costume or uniform, but also because the comparison with Ruzena, whom he had rescued from men's degrading lusts, seemed almost a blasphemy. But already the bell had rung a third time, and while he stood on the platform saluting them the ladies fluttered their lace handkerchiefs, until at last only two white dots could be seen, and a thread of tender longing detached itself from Joachim's heart and stretched and span its way to the white dots at the very last moment, before they vanished in the distance.

Saluted stiffly by the porter and the staff, he left the station and stepped out into the Küstrinerplatz. The square looked empty and a little unkempt, gloomy too, although it was still penetrated by the sun, a kind of borrowed sun, while the real one was shining outside on the golden fields. And if this reminded him, in a way very difficult to understand, of Ruzena, yet it was true that Ruzena, full as she was of the sun, yet dark and a little unkempt, was as closely akin to Berlin as Elisabeth was to the fields through which she was travelling now, and to her father's house standing in its park. There was an orderly satisfaction in coming to this conclusion. Nevertheless he was glad that he had rescued Ruzena from her obscure occupation with its false glitter, glad that he was about to free her from the tangle of threads which stretched over this whole city, from this net which he felt everywhere, in the Alexanderplatz and in the dingy machine factory and in the suburb with the little greengrocer's shop, an impenetrable, incomprehensible net of civilian values which was invisible and yet darkened everything. He must deliver Ruzena from these entanglements, for here too he had to prove himself worthy of Elisabeth. But this was only a very vague thought, a thought which moreover he had no wish to make clear, probably because it would have seemed absurd even to himself.

Eduard von Bertrand, who found himself in a position to extend his industrial commitments in Bohemia, suddenly remembered Ruzena in Prague, felt a sort of homesickness for her, and wished he could say something kind to comfort her. And as he did not know her address he wrote to Pasenow, saying that in grateful recollection of their last meeting he hoped to meet him again when he stopped at Berlin on his way back to Hamburg, and added his kindest regards to Ruzena, praising up her beautiful country. Then he took a stroll through the town.

After the evening when Bertrand and Ruzena had met, Pasenow had expected something unexpected and solemn, something perhaps even dreadful, to happen; for example that Bertrand might repay in the same coin the privilege and confidence into which he had been admitted that evening, though an abduction of Ruzena also did not lie beyond the sphere of possibility; for business men were conscienceless. But when neither the one thing nor the other happened, and Bertrand simply departed according to programme, not even sending a line, Joachim actually felt hurt. Then quite unexpectedly came the letter from Prague; he showed it to Ruzena and said hesitatingly: "You seem to have made an impression on Bertrand." Ruzena made a grimace: "Not care. Not like your friend; he's ugly man." Joachim defended Bertrand, saying that he wasn't ugly. "Not know: not like him: says such things," Ruzena decided, "mustn't come again." Joachim was very well pleased by her words, though he felt urgently in need of Bertrand's help, especially when she added: "To-morrow I go to dramatic school." He knew that she would not go unless he conducted her, for of course she couldn't very well, but how could he conduct her there? How did one set about such a thing? Ruzena was quite resolved to "work," and the planning of an occupation for her provided a new subject of conversation with the unusual charm of seriousness, although Joachim felt quite helpless in front of all the questions it threw up. Perhaps he felt that an ordinary vocation would rob her of the exotic grace with which she hovered between two worlds, and cast her back into her native barbarism; and it was indeed for this reason that his imagination stopped at the idea of a part as an actress, an idea with which Ruzena concurred enthusiastically: "You see how famous will I be! You love me then." But the prospect was a distant one, and nothing happened. Bertrand had once spoken of the vegetative indolence in which most people lived; probably it was much the same as that inertia of feeling he had talked about. Yes, if Bertrand were only here: with his knowledge of the world and his practical experience, perhaps he might be of some

help. And so when Bertrand reached Berlin he found an urgent invitation from Pasenow awaiting him in reply to his friendly note.

It could be managed, Bertrand said, to the great astonishment of both of them, it could be managed, though they mustn't imagine that the stage provided either an easy career or one with a particularly brilliant future. Of course he had better connections in Hamburg, but he would be glad to do what he could here. And then things developed far more quickly than they had hoped for; in a few days Ruzena was summoned to a voice test which she stood not too badly, and shortly after that she was engaged as a chorus girl. Joachim's suspicion that his friend's sudden readiness to oblige sprang from his designs on Ruzena could not hold out against Bertrand's benevolently indifferent, one might almost say clinical, attitude. It would all have been much clearer if Bertrand had made his efforts on Ruzena's behalf a pretext for openly declaring his love for her. In his heart Joachim was now seriously offended with Bertrand, who had indeed spent three evenings in his and Ruzena's company talking in his usual irrepressible way, but had showed nothing except the old friendly reserve of which Joachim was already sick, and still remained a stranger though he had done more for Ruzena than Joachim himself with his mooning, romantic fancies. All this was very painful. What was this fellow Bertrand after? Now that he was going away, and, as was only fitting, declined all thanks from or on behalf of Ruzena, he was expressing once more the hope that he would soon see Joachim again. Wasn't it hypocritical? And Joachim, astonished at himself, replied: "I'm afraid, Bertrand, that you won't find me in Berlin when you come next, for I'll have to go to Stolpin for a few weeks after the manœuvres. But if you would really like to visit me there I should be awfully glad to see you." And Bertrand accepted.

It had always been a custom of Herr von Pasenow to await the arrival of the post in his study. From time immemorial a place had been kept free on the table beside the pile of sports journals, and on this place the messenger had duly to deposit his bag. And although on most days the contents of the bag were disappointing, often consisting of nothing but two or three journals, yet Herr von Pasenow always took down the key from the antler-rack, where he used to hang it, and opened the lock in the yellow brass plate with the same avid eagerness. And while the messenger, cap in hand, waited in silence, gazing at the floor, Herr von Pasenow took out the letters and packets, sat down with them at his desk, set aside first those for himself and his family, and after carefully scrutinizing the addresses on the others handed them to the messenger to take to the servants they were destined for. Sometimes he had to put a curb upon himself to refrain from opening this or the other letter addressed to one of the maids, for this seemed to him an obvious right, a variation of *the jus primœ noctis* of the master; and the fact that the secrecy of the post should protect menials was a new-fangled notion that went against the grain. Nevertheless there were a few among the servants who actually complained about his external scrutiny of their envelopes, especially as the master did not scruple to inquire afterwards into the contents of the letters and to quiz the maids. This had led already to violent scenes, which had ended however with dismissals, and the rebels no longer objected openly, but either fetched their letters from the post office themselves, or gave secret instructions to the postmaster to have them delivered by the postman. Yes, for some time even the deceased young master had been seen daily dismounting from his horse at the post office so as to collect his correspondence; it may have been that he was expecting letters from some lady which he did not want the old man to see, or that he was engaged on business which must remain secret; but the postmaster, who usually was free enough with his information, could not confirm either of those suppositions, as the few letters which Helmuth von Pasenow received gave no clue. Nevertheless the obstinate rumour persisted that, through some machinations or other with the post office, the old man had ruined a project of marriage and the happiness of his son. The women on the estate and in the village stuck to this with particular obstinacy, and perhaps they were not so very far wrong, for Helmuth had become more and more indifferent and melancholy, had soon discontinued his rides to the village, and had let his letters be brought again in the great post-bag to the estate and his father's writing-table.

Herr von Pasenow had always had this passion for the post, and so it was not a matter for surprise that as time went on it should become more intense. Now he often so arranged his morning ride or walk as to meet the messenger, and then it was seen that, instead of leaving the key hanging on the antler-rack, he now carried it in his pocket so that he might unlock the bag under the open sky. There he would busily look through the letters but then put them back in the bag again so as not to disturb the household ritual, which was still gone through in the usual way. One morning, however, he actually got as far as the post office where the messenger was still leaning against the counter, and waited until the mail-bag was emptied on the worn table, and then, together with the postmaster, arranged and sorted the letters. When the messenger related this extraordinary incident at the big house the housemaid Agnes, known everywhere for her sharp tongue, remarked: "Now he's beginning to suspect himself." That was of course a saying without

any sense in it, and the unshakable obstinacy with which she, more than any of the others, maintained that the master was responsible for his son's death may perhaps be put down as a belated outcome of the resentment which she had nursed for years at being quizzed by the old man about her correspondence while she was still young and buxom.

Yes, Herr von Pasenow had always been queer about the post, and so his behaviour now was nothing to be surprised at. Nor was it a surprising thing that the pastor was invited to supper more often, nor that in his walks Herr von Pasenow now and then actually presented himself at the parsonage. No, there was nothing strange in that, and the pastor regarded it as the fruit of the spiritual comfort he had expended. Only Herr von Pasenow himself knew that it was an inexplicable and mysterious impulse which drove him to the pastor although he could not endure the man, an undefined hope that the voice which was uplifted in the church must needs reveal to him something for which he was waiting, something which, in spite of his fear that it would never be vouchsafed, he was not able even to name to himself. When the pastor brought the conversation round to Helmuth, often Herr von Pasenow would say: "It doesn't matter," and to his own astonishment would change the subject as if he were afraid of the Unknown he was yet longing for. But sometimes there were days when he suffered the Unknown to draw near, and then it was like a game which he had played as a child: someone hid a ring where it could be seen, hanging it perhaps on a chandelier or a key, and when the seeker moved away from it the others shouted "Cold," and when he drew near they said "Warm," or "Hot." And so it was quite natural that once when the pastor began to speak of Helmuth, Herr von Pasenow should say, suddenly and clearly, "Hot, hot!" and almost clap his hands. The pastor agreed politely that it had indeed been very warm that day, and Herr von Pasenow found himself back in his surroundings again. Yet it was strange how close things were to each other: one thought one was in the middle of a childish game, and yet death was already taking a hand. So "Yes, yes, it's warm," said Herr von Pasenow, though he looked as if he were freezing, "yes, in these hot nights the barns easily take fire."

The thought of the heat did not leave him even at supper: "In Berlin it must be terribly hot these days. Joachim hasn't said anything about it, though … but then he says so little in his letters in any case." The pastor touched on the strenuous duties of the service. "Service! What service?" asked Herr von Pasenow so sharply that in his confusion the pastor could not think of an answer. The pastor meant of course, Frau von Pasenow put in, that the service did not give Joachim much leisure for writing, especially now when the manœuvres were on. "Well then, he should leave the service," growled Herr von Pasenow. Then he drank several glasses of wine rapidly one after another and declared that he felt better. He filled the pastor's glass: "Drink up, Pastor, drinking warms you, and when you see double you feel less lonely." "The man who has God with him is never lonely, Herr von Pasenow," replied the pastor, and Herr von Pasenow found the reproof tactless. Hadn't he always rendered to God what was God's and to the Emperor, or more correctly the King, what was his due? One son was serving the King and did not write, and the other God had taken to Himself, and the world was empty and cold. Yes, it was easy for the pastor to talk so loftily; his house was full, too full for his circumstances, and now there was another on the way again. It wasn't so difficult to have God with one in these circumstances: he would have liked to tell the pastor that, but he dared not fall out with him, for who would be left then, when nobody wanted to visit him now except … then, just when It was becoming visible, the thought broke off and hid itself, and Herr von Pasenow said softly and dreamily: "It must be warm in the byre." Frau von Pasenow looked in dismay at her husband: had he been drinking his wine too fast? But Herr von Pasenow had got up and stood listening near the window; the lamp lighted up only the table, else she must have seen the expression of terrified expectation on his face, which vanished however when the crunching tread of the night watchman became audible on the gravel outside. Herr von Pasenow went to the window, leant out and called: "Jürgen." And when Jürgen's heavy footsteps halted before the window Herr von Pasenow ordered him to keep an eye on the barns. "It's just twelve years since the big barn on the home farm was burned down on a warm night like this." And when Jürgen dutifully remembered and said: "No fear, sir," for Frau von Pasenow too the incident passed again into the accustomed and the ordinary, so that she thought no more of it when Herr von Pasenow said good-night, adding that he had still a letter to write which must go by the morning post. At the door he turned round again: "Tell me, Herr Pastor, why do we have children? You should know: you've had plenty of practice." And he scuttled away tittering, but a little like a dog hobbling on three legs.

Alone with the pastor, Frau von Pasenow said; "I'm glad to see him in better spirits again. Since the departure of our poor Helmuth he's been very downcast."

As August drew towards its end the doors of the theatre opened again. Ruzena now had visiting-cards on which she was designated as an actress, and Joachim would soon have to depart to Upper Franconia for the manœuvres. He was annoyed at Bertrand for having established Ruzena in a profession which in reality was no less disreputable than her work in the Jäger Casino. Of course one could not but put some of the blame

on Ruzena herself for allowing herself to be implicated in such a profession, though perhaps still more on her mother for not having brought up her daughter better. But all that he had intended to do to remedy that had been ruined now through Bertrand. Perhaps indeed things were actually worse than before. For in the casino you knew where you were, and everything was plain sailing: the stage, on the other hand, had its own peculiar atmosphere, an atmosphere of homage and bouquets; and nowhere else was it so difficult for a young girl to remain respectable. That was generally admitted. Yes, it only meant a deeper and deeper descent, and Ruzena refused to see this, but instead was actually proud of her new profession and her visiting-cards. With an air of great consequence she recounted green-room gossip and all the scandal of the boards which he had no wish to listen to, and into the twilight of their life together reflections from the glare of the footlights were now perpetually breaking. How could he have ever imagined that he would find his way to her or that she had really belonged to him, she who had been lost from the beginning? He still sought her, but the stage had arisen before him like a menace, and when she eagerly recounted the love affairs of her colleagues, he saw in this a challenge and the firm intention of her awakened ambition to do what they did, saw too that this would mean a return to her former life, which had probably been spent not so very differently: for human beings were always drawn back inevitably to their starting-point. He regretted the shattered bliss of his twilit passion, the lost sweetness of longing which still filled his heart, it was true, and brought tears to his eyes, yet bore within it the presage of an eternal parting.

And now too emerged once more a fancy of which he had thought himself rid for good, and if he felt no compulsion now to seek in Ruzena's face for that of her Italian brother, yet it was engraved there in a perhaps more baffling form, engraved as the indelible countenance of that life from which he had not been able to deliver her. And again his suspicions awoke that it was Bertrand who had suggested this fancy to him, who had engineered it all, and who like Mephistopheles wished to destroy everything, not even sparing Ruzena. And on the top of this the manœuvres were approaching: how would he find Ruzena on his return? Would he ever, indeed, find her again? They promised each other that they would write often, daily; but Ruzena had all sorts of difficulties with her German, and as moreover she was proud of her visiting-cards, and he was unwilling to destroy her childish pleasure, the post often brought him nothing but one of those cards with the hateful inscription "Actress" and the words "Send lots of luv," a word which seemed to desecrate the sweetness of her kisses. Nevertheless he was greatly disturbed when for a few days he received no word from her, although he had to tell himself that his rapid movements during the manœuvres made a delay of the post quite explicable; and he was delighted when presently one of the horrid little cards arrived. And suddenly and without warning, like a memory, there came the thought that Bertrand too was a sort of actor.

Ruzena really longed for Joachim. His letters contained descriptions of his camp life and the evenings in the little villages, where he would feel really happy only "if you, dear, sweet little Ruzena, were beside me." And when he requested her to look at the moon at nine o'clock in the evening precisely, so that their glances might meet up there, she ran to the stage door during the interval, and though the interval did not come until half-past nine she gazed up dutifully at the sky. To her it seemed that that early spring afternoon in the rain still held her fast and paralysed something in her; the flood-tide which had submerged her then was only gradually receding, and although the girl's will was not strong enough and she had besides no resources out of which to erect dams to hold the waters, yet the air which she breathed in and out was still permeated with a soft humidity. True, she envied those colleagues who received bouquets at their dressing-room doors, but she envied them simply for Joachim's sake, since he ought to have had a celebrated diva as a lover. And although a woman in love often carries about with her that suggestion of the erotic which to many men is so delicately attractive, the men who laid their homage before the actresses were of a different type, and not likely to recognize such gentle indications. So it happened that Ruzena was more inviolate than ever when she received Joachim on his return to Berlin after the manœuvres, and she looked on this as a victory, a victory on which, she nevertheless knew, defeat would follow; but she did not want to acknowledge this and stifled the knowledge under embraces.

Ever since the train had left the station and she had waved good-bye with her lace handkerchief, Elisabeth had been trying to make clear to herself whether she loved Joachim. It was an almost joyful ground for reassurance that the feeling which she hopefully designated as love should have such a very unassuming and civilized appearance; one had actually to search one's mind to discern it, for it was so faint and thin that only against a background of silvery ennui did it become visible. But now that she drew nearer and nearer to her home, and her ennui was changed into mounting impatience, the soft contours of the image faded; and when the Baron met them at the station with the new pair of horses, and also when they reached Lestow, and the green tree-tops of the peaceful park appeared, enclosed by the quiet massiveness of the gate—the first surprise, for to right and left two new lodges had been erected, so that the

ladies uttered cries of lively astonishment, which were but the prelude, however, to the many they would utter in the next few days—it was only too comprehensible that Elisabeth should no longer think of love at all. For the Baron had once more employed the absence of his two ladies, or as he sometimes called them to Elisabeth's gratified pride, his two wives, to carry out countless improvements and embellishments to the house, alterations which delighted them and gained for him many words of praise and tender gratitude. They had indeed every cause to be proud of their artistic papa; although he had no exaggerated respect for the existing order and had already adorned the old manor-house with all sorts of additions, he yet had an eye for more than mere architecture; for he never forgot that there was always a free space on a wall where a new picture would look well, a corner which could be set off by a massive vase, or a sideboard which could be furnished with a gold-embroidered velvet cloth: and he was the man to carry out his ideas. Since their marriage the Baron and the Baroness had become collectors, and the continual further perfecting of their home had grown for them into a sort of perpetuation of their first engagement, and had remained so even after the arrival of their daughter. As time went on Elisabeth indeed became conscious that her parents' passion for emphasizing the various family festivals of the year, for celebrating the birthdays and continually thinking out new surprises, had a deeper significance and was connected in a profound way, difficult to fathom, with their delight, indeed one might almost call it their greed, in surrounding themselves continuously with new things. Certainly Elisabeth did not know that every collector hopes with the never-attained, never-attainable and yet inexorably striven-for absolute completeness of his collection to pass beyond the assembled things themselves, to pass over into infinity, and, entirely subsumed in his collection, to attain his own consummation and the suspension of death. Elisabeth did not know this, but surrounded by all those beautiful dead things gathered together and piled up around her, surrounded by all those beautiful pictures, she divined nevertheless that the pictures were hung up as though to strengthen the walls, and that all those dead things were put there to cover, perhaps also to conceal and guard, something intensely living; something with which she herself was so intimately bound that she could not but feel at times when a new picture was brought in that it was a little brother or sister; something which begged to be cherished and was cherished by her parents as though their common life together depended upon it. She divined the fear behind all this, fear that sought to drown in festivals the monotony of every day which is the outward sign of growing old, fear that was always reassuring itself—by perpetual fresh surprises—that they were all alive and in the flesh and definitively together, and that their circle was closed for ever. And just as the Baron was always adding new stretches of his property to the park, whose dark and thickly grown copses were now surrounded on almost every side by wide borders of tender light-green young wood, so it seemed to Elisabeth that with almost feminine solicitude he wished to turn all their life into an ever more spacious enclosed park full of pleasant resting-places, and that he would reach his goal and be free of all apprehension only when the park had spread over the whole earth, attaining its object of becoming a park in which Elisabeth might walk about for ever. It is true that occasionally something in her rebelled against this gentle and inescapable compulsion, but as her resistance was hardly ever very definite, it dissolved into the sunny contours of the hills that lay in the distance beyond the seclusion of the park.

"Oh!" cried the Baroness as they stood admiring the new pergola in the rosarium. "Oh, how pretty! It might have been set up for a bride." She smiled at Elisabeth, and the Baron smiled too, but in their eyes could be read their fear of the ineluctable menace, their helplessness, their fore-knowledge of a coming infidelity and treachery which nevertheless they forgave in advance, for they too had sinned. How terrible it was that the mere thought of her future marriage should seem already to oppress her parents. And Elisabeth put all thoughts of marriage completely out of her mind, so completely indeed that it almost seemed to her that she could listen without compunction to her parents when, as a sort of concession to her presumable destiny to fall in love and at the same time as a sort of act of recognition which raised her to their own level, giving her almost the status of a sister, they talked of a possible match. Perhaps that was why, when her mother pressed a tender kiss on her cheek, Elisabeth could not help thinking of her Aunt Brigitte's wedding day, could not help feeling that this kiss too was a kiss of farewell: for just so had her mother kissed Aunt Brigitte, kissed her with tears, with tears although she had declared that she was very happy and was delighted with her new young brother-in-law. But of course that was all long past now; it was childish to muse on it, and going between her parents Elisabeth put her arms round their shoulders and walked with them to the pergola, where they sat down. The rose-beds, threaded with narrow, symmetrically winding paths, blazed with all their hues and were full of fragrance, yet all the shadows were not yet dispersed, and the Baron said, pointing sadly towards one bed: "I've tried to set some Manettis there, but I'm afraid our climate is too rough for them," and as if he wished to bribe his daughter with the promise, he added: "but if it succeeds and they grow all right, then they'll belong to Elisabeth." Elisabeth felt the pressure of his hand, and it was almost like an intimation that there was something that could never be clutched firmly enough, something that might almost be time itself, something compressed and twisted like

a watch-spring and that was threatening to uncoil, to wind out between their fingers, becoming longer and longer, an alarming, long, thin white band which presently would begin to creep, seeking to twine round her like an evil snake, until she became fat and old and hideous. Perhaps her mother too was feeling this, for she said: “When the child leaves us one day we’ll sit out here by ourselves.” And, conscious of her guilt, Elisabeth said: “But I’m going to stay with you always,” said it with a feeling of shame, for she did not believe it herself, and yet it sounded like the renewal of an old vow. “In any case, I can’t see why she shouldn’t stay here with her husband when that happens,” the Baroness went on. But her father warded the subject off: “It’s a long time still before that can happen.” And Elisabeth could not help once more thinking of Aunt Brigitte, who passed her days in Würbendorf, and had grown fat, and squabbled with her children, and had now so little in common with the beloved figure of former days that one could not imagine she had ever existed and was almost ashamed of the happiness that she had once given one. And yet Würbendorf was a gayer and friendlier place than Stolpin, and everybody had been delighted to get a new young relation in Uncle Albert. It may have been that it was not really Aunt Brigitte whom she had loved so much, and that it was simply the admission of a new relation into the circle that had roused such exciting and dear emotions. For if one were related to everybody the world would be like a well-kept park, and to acquire a new relation would be like planting a new variety of rose in the garden. Infidelity and treachery would then turn to lighter offences; she had surely divined that already at the time when she had been so glad about Uncle Albert; and in the ocean of injustice surrounding them it was perhaps on this little islet of forgiveness that her parents now sought refuge when they spoke of her possible marriage as of an auspicious fate. But the Baroness had not yet given up her idea; and as life consists of compromises she said: “Besides, our little house in the west end will always be ready for them.” But Elisabeth’s hand still lay in her father’s and felt its pressure, and Elisabeth would not hear of compromise. “No; I’ll stay with you,” she repeated almost defiantly, and she remembered how bitterly she had resented as a child being banished from her parents’ bedroom and not being allowed to watch over their breathing; still, though the Baroness had always had a weakness for talking about death, which she said often came upon people in their sleep, and though she had alarmed Elisabeth and her husband with such sayings, yet there had been the morning’s joyful surprise that the night had not parted them for ever, a surprise which grew into a daily renewed wild longing that they should take one another by the hand and hold on so fast that they could never be torn asunder. So they sat now in the pergola, which was filled with the roses’ scent; Elisabeth’s little dog came scampering up and greeted her as though he had found her for eternity, and put his paws on her knees. The stems of the rose-trees stood up stiff and hard against the green wall of the garden and the clear blue sky. Never would she be able to greet a stranger, no matter how nearly related he was to her, with the same intense joy in the morning; never would she think of his birthday with such passionate and almost pious devotion as of that of her father; never would she surround him with that incomprehensible and yet sublime anxiety which was love. And having recognized this she now smiled affectionately at her parents and stroked the head of her little dog Bello, which with apprehensively loving eyes gazed up devotedly at her.

Later she began to feel bored, and the faint feeling of resistance too returned once more. Then it was not unpleasant to think of Joachim, and she remembered his slim figure as he had stood bowing slightly, in his long angular officer’s coat, on the platform. But his image got strangely and inextricably entangled with that of her young Aunt Brigitte, and by this time she could not make out whether it was Joachim who was going to marry Brigitte, or she herself who was going to wed the young Uncle Albert of her childhood. And although she knew that love was not what it was represented to be in operas and romances, yet this much was certain, that she could think of Joachim without apprehension; indeed, even when she tried to picture to herself that the departing train might have caught his sword and flung him under the wheels, the picture filled her with horror certainly, but not with that sweet sorrow and dread, that trembling anxiety, which bound her to the lives of her parents. When she recognized this it was as though she had renounced something, and yet there was a sort of melancholy relief in it. Nevertheless she resolved to ask Joachim some time what was his birthday.

Joachim had returned to Stolpin. While he was still on his way from the station, just after he had passed through the village and reached the first fields on the estate, a new feeling had unexpectedly risen in him: he tried to find words for it and found them: my property. When he got down at the manor-house he was furnished with a new sentiment of home.

Now he was with his father and mother, and if their company had been restricted to the breakfast-hour it would have been very tolerable; it was a pleasure to sit out under the great lime-trees, the cool sunny garden stretching before him; and the rich yellow butter, the honey and the big basket of fruit, were all in pleasing contrast to his hurried breakfasts in the army. But already the midday and evening meals were an affliction; the more the day advanced the more their companionship weighed on all three, and if in the

mornings the old people felt happy at the reappearance of their absent son, and, it may be, daily expected something beautiful and life-giving from him, yet the day—punctuated by the meals—turned stage by stage into a disappointment, and towards late afternoon Joachim's presence had grown almost into an intensification of their mutual unendurable loneliness; indeed even the prospect of the post, the one ray of light in the monotony of the day, was made poorer by their son's presence, and if the old man in spite of this still went out every morning to meet the messenger, it was almost an act of despair, was almost like a veiled appeal to Joachim to go away for heaven's sake and send a few letters. And yet Herr von Pasenow himself seemed to know he was awaiting something quite different from Joachim's letters, and that the messenger for whom he was looking was not the messenger with the letter-bag.

Joachim made a few faint attempts to become more intimate with his parents. He went to see his father in the room decorated with the antlers, and inquired about the harvest and the shooting, and hoped perhaps that the old man might be gratified by this indirect attempt to follow his request to "work himself in." But either his father had forgotten his request, or did not himself know very much about what was happening on the estate; for he gave only reluctant or evasive responses and once actually said: "You needn't trouble yourself about that so early in the day," and Joachim, though relieved from a burdensome obligation, could not help thinking again of the time when he had been sent to the cadet school and robbed for the first time of his home. But now he had returned and was awaiting a guest of his own. It was a pleasant sensation, and though it hid within it a good deal of hostility towards his father, Joachim was not aware of this; indeed he hoped that his parents would be delighted with this interruption of their growing boredom and look forward with the same impatience as himself to Bertrand's arrival. He submitted to his father's going through his correspondence, and when finally the old man handed it over to him with the words: "Unfortunately there still seems to be no news of your friend, that is, if he's coming at all," Joachim refused to read anything but regret into the sentence, although it had a malicious ring. His irritation did not come to a head until once he saw a letter from Ruzena in his father's hands. Yet the old man made no comment, but only stuck his monocle in his eye and observed: "Really, you must pay the Baddensens a visit soon; it's high time you did." Well, that might be taken as sarcasm, or it might not: but in any case it was sufficient to spoil so completely Joachim's pleasure at the prospect of seeing Elisabeth that he kept putting off the visit again and again; and though her image and her fluttering handkerchief had faithfully accompanied him till now, he felt himself filled more and more urgently with the wish, which he pictured in his imagination, that Eduard von Bertrand should be sitting beside him on the seat of the carriage when he drew up before the front door at Lestow.

But that did not happen, at least to begin with, for one day Elisabeth and her mother paid a belated visit of condolence to Herr and Frau von Pasenow. Elisabeth felt disappointed, and yet in some way relieved, that Joachim was not there when they arrived; she felt also a little offended. They sat in the smaller drawing-room, and the ladies learned from Herr von Pasenow that Helmuth had died for the honour of his name. Elisabeth involuntarily remembered that perhaps in no very long time she too would bear this name for which someone had fallen, and with an access of pride and pleased astonishment she realized that Herr and Frau von Pasenow would then become new relations. They talked about the melancholy occurrence, and Herr von Pasenow said: "That's how it is when one has sons; they die for honour or for their king and country—it's stupid having sons," he added sharply and challengingly. "Oh, but daughters get married, and before you know they're away," responded the Baroness with an almost meaning smile, "and we old people are always left behind alone." Herr von Pasenow did not reply, as would have been polite, that the Baroness could not by any means be regarded as old, but became quite still, staring fixedly in front of him, and after a short silence said: "Yes, we're left behind alone, left behind alone," and after he had reflected a little longer with obvious concentration, "and we die alone." "But, Herr von Pasenow, we have no need to think of dying yet!" the Baroness brought out in a dutifully cheerful voice. "Oh, we needn't think of that for a long time yet: the rain brings sunshine, my dear Herr von Pasenow; you must always try to remember that." Herr von Pasenow found his way back to reality and became again the cavalier: "Provided that the sunshine comes to us in your person, Baroness," he said, and without waiting for the Baroness's flattered response he went on: "yet how strange things are now … the house is empty, and even the post brings nothing. I've written Joachim, but I don't hear much from him; he's at the manœuvres." Frau von Pasenow turned in dismay to her husband: "But … but, you know Joachim is here." A venomous glance was her punishment for this correction. "Well, did he write, yes or no? And where is he now?" and there would have been a mild squabble if the canary in its cage had not released its quiver of golden notes. They gathered round it as round a fountain and for a few moments forgot everything else: it was as though this slender golden thread of sound, rising and falling, were winding itself round them and linking them in that unity on which the comfort of their living and dying was established; it was as though this thread which wavered up and filled their being, and yet curved and wound back again to its source, suspended their speech, perhaps because it

was a thin, golden ornament in space, perhaps because it brought to their minds for a few moments that they belonged to each other, and lifted them out of the dreadful stillness whose reverberations rise like an impenetrable wall of deafening silence between human being and human being, a wall through which the human voice cannot penetrate, so that it has to falter and die. But now that the canary was singing not even Herr von Pasenow himself could hear that dreadful stillness, and they all had a feeling of warmth when Frau von Pasenow said: "But now we must have some coffee." And when they went through the big drawing-room, whose curtains were drawn to keep out the afternoon sun, none of them remembered that Helmuth had lain there on his bier.

Then Joachim arrived and Elisabeth had a second disappointment, for her memory held an image in uniform, and now he was dressed in hunting kit. They were distant and embarrassed towards each other, and even when with the others they had returned to the drawing-room, and Elisabeth was standing before the canary's cage amusing herself by pushing a finger through the wires and seeing the little creature pecking wrathfully at it, even while she was deciding that in her own drawing-room—if she ever should marry—she would always have a little yellow bird such as this one, even then she could no longer associate Joachim with the idea of marriage. Yet that was actually rather pleasant and reassuring and made it easier for her as she said good-bye to arrange that they should at an early date go out riding together. Before that, of course, he must pay them a call.

Bertrand had at last found time to comply with Pasenow's invitation, and on the way down stepped out of the evening train for a two days' stay in Berlin. Naturally enough he wanted to have news of Ruzena; so he made straight for the theatre and sent his name, along with a bouquet of flowers, to her dressing-room. Ruzena was delighted when she got his card, delighted too with the flowers, and it flattered her that Bertrand should be waiting for her at the stage door at the end of the performance: "Well, little Ruzena, how are you getting on?" And Ruzena replied in one breath that she was getting on splendidly, splendidly, oh, really very badly, because she longed so much for Joachim; but now of course she felt all right because she was so delighted that Bertrand had called for her, for he was such an intimate friend of Joachim's. But when they were sitting opposite each other in the restaurant, having talked a great deal about Joachim, Ruzena, as often happened with her, became suddenly sad: "Now you go to Joachim and I have stay here: world is unjust." "Of course world is unjust, and far worse than you have any conception of, little Ruzena"—it seemed to both of them natural that he should address her as "du"—"and it was partly my anxiety about you that brought me here." "What you mean by that?" "Well, I don't like your being in this stage business." "Why? It very nice." "I was too hasty in giving in to you both … just because you were romantic and had formed God knows what picture of the stage." "I not understand what you mean." "Well, never mind, but it's out of the question for you to stay in it. What can it lead to finally? What is to become of you, child? Someone must look after you, and that can't be done with romantic notions." Ruzena replied stiffly and on her dignity that she could quite well look after herself, and Joachim could just go if he wanted to be rid of her, he could just go, "and you bad man, to come here just to speak ill of friend"; then she cried and gave Bertrand hostile looks through her tears. He found it difficult to reassure her, for she persisted that he was a bad man and a bad friend who wanted to spoil her happy evening. And all at once she grew very pale and fixed terrified eyes upon him: "He sent you to say he finish with me: all over!" "But, Ruzena!" "No, you can say ten time no, I know it; oh, you bad, both two of you. You brought me here, so to shame me." Bertrand saw that by rational means nothing could be done; yet in her untutored suspicions there was perhaps a divination of the real state of affairs and its hopelessness. She looked as desperate as a little animal that does not know where to turn. And yet perhaps it would be good for her to regard the future more soberly. So he merely shook his head and replied: "Tell me, child, couldn't you go back to your own home and stay there while Joachim is away?" All that she could draw from this was that she was going to be sent away. "But, Ruzena, who wants to send you away? Only it would be much better for you to be with your people than alone here in Berlin in this silly stage life.…" She would not let him finish: "I have nobody, all bad to me … I have nobody, and you want send me away." "But be reasonable, Ruzena: when Pasenow is in Berlin again you can come back too." Ruzena would not listen any more to him and said she was going. But he did not want to let her go like that, and considered how he could turn her thoughts in a happier direction; at last he hit upon the idea that they should write Joachim a letter between them. Ruzena agreed at once; so he had notepaper brought and wrote: "In warm remembrance of a happy evening with you, kindest greetings from Bertrand," and she added: "And lots of luv from Ruzena." She pressed a kiss on the letter, but she could not restrain her tears. "All over," she repeated again and asked him to take her home. Bertrand gave in. But so that he might not have to leave her too soon to her melancholy fancies he suggested that they should go on foot. To calm her—for words were useless—he took her hand like a kind and skilful doctor; she snuggled close to him gratefully and as if seeking support and with a faint

pressure left her hand in his. She's just a little animal, thought Bertrand, and hoping to cheer her he said: "Yes, Ruzena, am I not a bad friend and an enemy of yours?" But she did not reply. A slight but tender irritation at her confused thinking arose in him and extended to take in Joachim too, whom he held responsible for Ruzena and her fate, and who yet seemed no less confused than the girl herself. It may have been because he could feel the warmth of her body that, at any rate for the space of a moment, he had the malicious thought that Joachim deserved to be betrayed with Ruzena: but he did not entertain this seriously and soon found again the affectionate good will which he had always cherished for Joachim. To him Joachim and Ruzena seemed creatures who lived only with a small fraction of their being in the time to which they belonged, the age to which their years entitled them; and the greater part of them was somewhere else, perhaps on another star or in another century, or perhaps simply in their childhood. Bertrand was struck by the fact that the world was full of people belonging to different centuries, who had to live together, and were even contemporaries; that accounted perhaps for their instability and their difficulty in understanding one another rationally; the extraordinary thing was that, nevertheless, there was a kind of human solidarity and an understanding that bridged the years. Probably Joachim, too, only needed to have his hand stroked. What should and what could he talk to him about? What object was there really in this visit to Stolpin? Bertrand felt irritated, but then he remembered that he would have to talk to Joachim of Ruzena's future; that gave a rational meaning to the journey and the waste of time, and once more restored to good spirits he squeezed Ruzena's hand.

They said good-night before her door; then they stood facing each other dumbly for a few moments, and it looked as though Ruzena were still expecting something. Bertrand smiled and before she could give him her mouth kissed her somewhat avuncularly on the cheek. She touched his hand lightly and was about to slip away, but he kept her for a moment in the doorway: "Well, Ruzena, I'm leaving to-morrow morning. What message am I to give to Joachim?" "Nothing," she replied quickly and crossly, but then she reflected: "You bad, but I come to station." "Good-night, Ruzena," said Bertrand, and again the slight feeling of exasperation rose in him, but as he could still feel on his lips the downy softness of her cheek he continued walking to and fro in the dark street, gazing up at the block and waiting for a light to appear behind one of the windows. But either her light had been burning before or her room looked out on the back yard—Joachim might surely have got her better lodgings—at any rate Bertrand waited in vain, and after he had regarded the block for some time, he decided that he had done quite enough for the cause of romanticism, lit a cigar and went home.

While the reception-rooms were provided with parquet-flooring, the guest-rooms on the first floor had merely polished boards, huge planks of soft white wood separated from each other by somewhat darker connecting boards. The trunks from which those planks were once cut must have been gigantic ones, and although the wood was rather soft, yet their size and uniformity witnessed to the opulence of the man who had had them laid here. The joinings between the planks and the boards were closely fitted, and where they had widened on account of the shrinking of the wood they were so neatly plugged with chips that one scarcely noticed it. The furniture had obviously been made by the village carpenter and probably dated from the time when Napoleon's armies had passed through the vicinity; at least it forced one to think of that time, remotely reminding one of that style which is usually called Empire; however, it may have belonged to a slightly earlier or later period, for it diverged with all sorts of bulging lines from the severity of that norm. Here, for instance, was a wardrobe whose mirrored front was violently divided in two by a vertical strip of wood, and there were chests of drawers which, by possessing too many or too few shelves, offended against the laws of pure symmetry. Yet even although these furnishings were ranged against the walls almost without plan, even although the bed was stationed in the most inconvenient way between two doors, and the great white-tiled stove in the corner was squeezed between two cupboards, yet the spacious room had a comfortable and easy look, very pleasant when the sun shone through the white curtains, and the window, with its cross-bars, was mirrored on the glittering polish of the furniture. At such moments, indeed, it could actually happen that the great crucifix which hung on the wall over the bed no longer seemed a mere ornament or a customary article of furniture, but became once more what it had originally been when it was brought here: an admonition and reminder to the guest, warning him that he was in a Christian household, in a house which, it was true, provided in hosts of ways for his bodily comfort and from which he could ride out to the hunt in a merry company and return to devote himself to a hearty supper with abundance of strong wines, a house too where the roughest of practical jokes was permitted him, and where, at the time when the furniture in this room was joinered, an eye was closed if he should take a fancy to one of the maids; but a house nevertheless where it was considered inevitable that the guest, no matter how heavy he might feel after his wine, would have on retiring a desire to remember his soul and to repent of his sins. And it was in accordance with this essentially austere way of thought that over the

sofa covered with green repp should be hung a sober and austere steel-engraving which in many of the guests' minds awakened thoughts of Queen Luise, for it represented a stately lady in antique robes—*La Mère des Gracches* was the title of the picture —and not only did this costume remind them of the Queen, but the altar towards which she was lifting her arms also suggested the altar of the Fatherland. Certainly the majority of the huntsmen who had slept in this room had led a worldly life, seizing advantage and enjoyment wherever they offered, not scrupling to screw from the dealers the most they could for their grain and their pigs, devoted to a savage pastime in which God's creatures were shot down barbarously in heaps, many of them, too, filled with lust for women; but insolently as they claimed the arrogant and sinful life they led as an obvious right and privilege granted by Heaven, they were prepared to sacrifice it at any moment for the honour of the Fatherland or the glory of God, and even if the opportunity should never arise, yet this readiness to regard life as something secondary and scarcely worth considering was so potent that its sinfulness hardly counted for anything in the balance. And they did not feel that they were sinful when in the morning mist they strode through the faintly crackling undergrowth, or when at evening they climbed a steep, narrow ladder to a look-out perch, and gazed across bush and clearing, where the midges still wove their dances, to the edge of the wood. Then when the moist fragrance of grass and tree rose up to them and along the dry bulwark of the perch an ant came running and vanished in the bark, then sometimes in their souls, though they were pragmatic fellows with their feet firmly planted on the earth, something awoke that rang like music, and the lives they had lived and had still to live were concentrated so intensely into one moment that they could still feel the touch of their mother's hand on their hair as if for eternity, while another shape already stood before them, separated from them no longer by any span of time, any span of space, the shape which they did not fear: Death. Then all the woods around might turn for them into the wood of the Cross, for nowhere do the magical and the earthly lie closer together than in the heart of the hunter, and when the buck appears on the border of the clearing, then the illumination is bodily present and life seems to be timeless, evanescent and eternal, held in one's closed hand, so that the shot which kills a strange life is like a symbol of the need to save one's own life in the arms of grace. Always the hunter goes out to find the Cross in the antlers of the deer, and for that illumination the price even of death seems to him not too high. And so, too, when after his abundant supper, he returns to his room, he can presume to lift his eyes again to the crucifix, and, though from afar off, to think of the eternity in which his life is embedded. And perhaps in front of that eternity even the cleanliness of his body weighs no more in the balance than the sinfulness of his earthly life: on the wash-table stands a basin whose smallness is in ludicrous contrast to the size of the hunter and the customary dimensions of his life, and the jug, too, holds far less water than the wine he is accustomed to drink. Even the small commode beside the bed, which in the guise of a cupboard gives hospitality to a night-vessel, merely ratifies the inadequate proportions of the rest. The hunter employs it and flings himself on the groaning bed.

In this chamber, admirably suited to the needs of hunters for generations past, Bertrand was installed during his stay at Stolpin.

Among the remarkable memories which Bertrand brought back with him from his stay at Stolpin his picture of old Herr von Pasenow was not the least strange. On his very first day, immediately after breakfast, he was invited by the old gentleman to accompany him on his walk and be shown over the estate. It was a dull, thundery morning; the air was motionless, but the stillness was broken by the muffled thud of the flails coming from the direction of the two threshing-floors. Herr von Pasenow seemed to find pleasure in the rhythm; several times he remained standing and kept time with his stick. Then he asked: "Would you like to see the byres?" and set off towards the long, low sheds; but in the middle of the yard he stopped, shaking his head: "No use, the cows are out grazing." Bertrand inquired politely what breeds they were; Herr von Pasenow first gazed at him as though he did not understand the question, then said with a shrug of the shoulders "It doesn't matter," and led his guest out through the gate: all round the little hollow in which lay the farm hills broadened in field after field, and everywhere the harvest work was in progress. "It all belongs to the estate," said Herr von Pasenow, making a proud circular sweep with his stick; then his uplifted arm with the stick remained motionlessly fixed in one direction; Bertrand followed it with his eyes and saw the village church tower rising behind a hill. "That's where the post office is," Herr von Pasenow confided to him, making straight for the village. The heat was oppressive; the dull thudding of the flails fell gradually into silence behind them, and only the hissing of the scythes, the sound of blades being sharpened, and the rustling of the falling grain still hung in the air. Herr von Pasenow came to a stop: "Are you sometimes afraid too?" Bertrand was startled, but felt sympathetically touched by this very human question: "Me? Oh, often!" Herr von Pasenow grew interested and came nearer: "When are you afraid? When everything is still?" Bertrand saw that there was something wrong here: "No, stillness is sometimes wonderful: I simply love this stillness over the fields." Herr von Pasenow seemed put out and annoyed:

“You don’t understand.…” After a pause he began again: “Have you any children?” “To the best of my knowledge, no, Herr von Pasenow.” “Well, then.” Herr von Pasenow looked at his watch and peered into the distance; he shook his head: “Incomprehensible,” he said to himself, then to Bertrand: “Well, then *when* are you afraid?”—yet he did not wait for an answer, but looked again at his watch: “But he should have been here by now.” Then he looked Bertrand full in the face: “Will you write to me sometimes when you’re on your travels?” Bertrand said yes; he would be glad to do so, and Herr von Pasenow seemed greatly pleased. “Yes, do write to me, I’m interested, I’m interested in lots of things … write and tell me too when you’re afraid … but he isn’t here yet; you see nobody writes to me, not even my sons.…” Then far away a man with a black bag became visible. “There he is!” Herr von Pasenow set off at a brisk pace, stick and legs going together, and as soon as the man was within hearing distance he screamed at him: “Where have you been idling all this time? This is the last time that you’ll go for the post … you’re dismissed, do you hear? you’re dismissed!” He had grown red and waved his stick in the man’s face; while the latter, obviously used to such encounters, calmly took the bag from his shoulder and handed it to his master, who almost docilely drew the key from his waistcoat-pocket and with trembling fingers turned it in the lock. With a trembling hand he dived into the post-bag, but when he drew out only a few journals it looked as if his fit of rage were about to repeat itself, for he held his mail speechlessly under the messenger’s nose. But thereupon he evidently recollected the presence of his guest, for he showed the journals to Bertrand: “Here, you can see for yourself,” he grumbled and put them back in the bag, locked it, and said as they walked on again: “I’ll have to go and live in the town this year, I’m afraid: it’s too quiet for me here.”

They had just reached the village when the first drops of the thunder shower fell, and Herr von Pasenow proposed that they should seek refuge in the pastor’s house until it passed over. “You’ll have to meet him in any case,” he added. He was furious on learning that the pastor was not at home, and when the lady of the house said that her husband was at the school he broke out: “You seem to think too that you can tell an old man any story you like, but I’m not so old as not to know that this is the school holidays.” Yes, but she hadn’t meant that the pastor was teaching in the school, and besides he would be back in a minute. “Taradiddles,” grumbled Herr von Pasenow, but the lady refused to be daunted and asked the gentlemen to sit down and she would get them a glass of wine. When she had left the room Herr von Pasenow leant over to Bertrand: “He always tries to avoid me, for he knows that I see through him.” “See through what, Herr von Pasenow?” “Why, that he’s a thoroughly ignorant and incapable pastor, of course. But unfortunately I must keep on good terms with him all the same. Here in the country you’re thrown on the mercy of everyone and …” he hesitated, and added more softly: “and besides, he’s in charge of the graves.” The pastor came in and Bertrand was introduced to him as a friend of Joachim’s. “Yes, one comes and the other goes,” said Herr von Pasenow dreamily, and they did not know whether this indirect reference to poor Helmuth was intended as a compliment or an insult to Bertrand. “Yes, and this is our theologian,” he went on with his introduction, while the theologian smiled awkwardly. The Frau Pastor brought in the wine and a few slices of cold ham, and Herr von Pasenow emptied his glass hastily. While the others were still sitting round the table he went and stood at the window, tapped on the panes the rhythm of the threshing flails, and stared at the clouds as though he were impatient to get away. Into the halting phrases of the conversation he threw from the window: “Tell me, Herr von Bertrand, have you ever in your life met a learned theologian who knew nothing about the next world?” “Herr von Pasenow is pleased to have his joke with me,” said the abashed pastor. “Be so good then as to tell me yourself in what respect the priest of God is distinguished from us ordinary people if he has no connection with the next world?” Herr von Pasenow had turned round and now stared angrily and sharply through his monocle at the pastor. “And if he has learned anything about it, which I permit myself to doubt, what right has he to conceal it from us? … to conceal it from me?” He became somewhat more placable, “from me … on his own admission a sorely tried father.” The pastor replied softly: “God alone can send you a message, Herr von Pasenow; please believe me when I say that.” Herr von Pasenow shrugged his shoulders: “Oh, I believe it … I believe it, take my word for that.” After a pause, turning to the window with another shrug he said: “It doesn’t matter,” and glanced, once more drumming on the panes, along the street. The rain was falling more slowly, and Herr von Pasenow gave the word: “Now we can go.” As he left he shook the pastor’s hand: “And don’t forget to call on us … for supper to-night, what? Our young friend will be there too.” Then they went. There were pools in the village street, but on the fields the soil was almost dry again, the rain had hardly served to efface the cracks in the ground. The sky was still covered by a faint white veil, but the scorching sun, which would soon break through, could already be felt. Herr von Pasenow was silent and did not make any response to Bertrand’s conversation. But once he stopped and said solemnly with his stick uplifted: “You must be very much on your guard with these learned divines. Keep that in mind.”

On the following days these morning walks were repeated, and occasionally Joachim joined in them. But when Joachim was there the old man was morose and silent and even gave up his attempts to discover

what Bertrand's fears were. Indirectly and tentatively as he usually framed his questions, he now remained completely silent about them. But Joachim too was silent. For he too did not dare to ask Bertrand the questions he wished to have answered, and Bertrand remained obstinately in possession of his revelations. In this way the three of them wandered over the fields, and both father and son took it ill of Bertrand that he should disappoint their eager expectations. But Bertrand had the greatest difficulty in keeping a conversation going.

If at first Joachim had postponed his visit to Lestow because he had a fixed picture of arriving there with Bertrand, so now the slight annoyance which he felt against Bertrand was perhaps to blame for the fact that he postponed it still further: a vague hope had risen in him that if Bertrand would only speak out now, everything would fall into its place so smoothly and easily that without further ado he would be able straightway to take him to Lestow. But as in spite of this inducement, of which besides he knew nothing, Bertrand in the most disappointing manner persevered in his silence, Joachim was finally driven to make a decision and went alone. One afternoon he drove over to Lestow in the gig, his legs smoothly and decorously wrapped in the carriage rug, the whip held at the correct angle before him, and the reins running easily in his brown-gloved hand. When he left his father had said: "At last," and now Joachim was filled with distaste for this fantastic marriage project.

In front arose the church spire of the neighbouring village; a Catholic church, and it reminded him of Ruzena's Roman Catholic creed: Bertrand had told him about Ruzena. Wouldn't the most honest thing be to break off his silly stay here, and simply go back to her? Everything here was beginning to disgust him: the dust on the road, the dusty, wilting leaves of the trees beside it announcing the approach of autumn; he loathed it all. Since Bertrand's arrival he had been longing again for his uniform; two men in the same uniform, that was something impersonal, the King's badge; two men in the same kind of civilian clothes, that was shameless, it was like two brothers; and he felt that the short civilian jacket which left visible one's legs and the opening of one's trousers was in some way shameless. Elisabeth, who was condemned to seeing men in short jackets and unconcealed trousers, was to be pitied—strange that he had never had such regrets where Ruzena was concerned—but at least for this visit he should have put on his uniform. The broad white cravat with the horseshoe tie-pin concealed the opening of his waistcoat; that was good. He put up his hand and made certain that it was properly in place. It was not for nothing that they laid a cloth over the lower parts of the dead lying on their biers. Helmuth too had driven along this road to Lestow, had called on Elisabeth and her mother, and dust like this had been poured on him in his grave. Had his brother really left Elisabeth to him as a legacy? Or Ruzena? Or perhaps even Bertrand? They should have given Bertrand Helmuth's room, instead of putting him in the solitary guest-chamber; but that would not have been right either. It was all like a sort of inevitable clockwork which yet in some way depended on his own will and simply for that reason seemed inevitable and self-evident, certainly more inevitable than the clockwork routine of the service. But he could not follow out any further these thoughts, behind which lay probably something terrible, for now he was driving into the village and must keep a look-out for the children playing on the road; just beyond the village he turned into the park through the gate flanked right and left by the two lodges.

"I'm delighted to see you here again at last, Herr von Pasenow," said the Baron, meeting him in the hall, and when Joachim mentioned the guest because of whom his visit had been postponed the Baron reproached him for not having brought Bertrand along with him. Joachim himself could not understand now why he had not done so; certainly it would have given no offence; but when Elisabeth entered he thought after all that it was better that he should have come alone. He found her very beautiful, even Bertrand would not be able to resist the charm of such beauty, that was certain, and as certainly he would never dare in her presence to maintain that far too unconstrained tone which was customary with him. Nevertheless Joachim could almost have wished to see him doing so, somewhat as one wishes to hear a coarse word spoken in a church or even to be present at an execution.

They had tea on the terrace, and Joachim, who sat beside Elisabeth, had the sensation that he had been in the same position not so very long ago. But when could it have been? Almost three years had passed since his last visit to Lestow, and then it had been late autumn and it would not have been possible to sit out on the terrace. But while he was still brooding over this, and it seemed to him that during that visit they had had to light the lights in the house, a fantastic association led his thoughts quite into the absurd, and the confusion became almost inextricable, for his accomplice Bertrand—it repelled him a little that the word accomplice should occur to him—for the accomplice and witness of his intimacy with Ruzena was evidently expected to keep him company beside Elisabeth too! How on earth could he have ever thought of introducing him to his parents? The fatalistic feeling that through Bertrand's agency he had slipped from the straight path came back again, and suddenly the idea that after his tea he would have to stand up in his

civilian clothes became painful to him; he would have liked to leave his serviette lying on his knees, but already they were proposing a walk through the park. When the farm buildings came in sight the Baron observed that now of course his guest would soon be coming back to live in the country; at least his father had hinted at it. Joachim, filled with renewed antagonism to his father's attempt to determine his life, would have liked to reply that he had no intention of returning to his parents' house; of course one could not say such things, it would not be quite in accordance with the truth nor with his newly found attachment to his home and his property; and so he merely said that it wasn't an easy matter to leave the service, all the more as he would soon be given a captaincy. And one could not give up a profession one had grown fond of so easily as all that, even on grounds of sentiment; he had seen that most clearly in the case of his friend, Herr von Bertrand, who in spite of his many striking successes in business still probably longed in secret to be back with his regiment. And as though against his will he began to speak of Bertrand's world-wide business dealings and long journeys, and he surrounded him, almost with a boy's fantasy, with the nimbus of the explorer, until the ladies could not help expressing their delight over their approaching acquaintance with such an interesting man. All the same Pasenow had the impression that they were all afraid, if not of Bertrand, yet of the life which he led, for Elisabeth became almost subdued and remarked that she was quite incapable of thinking of a brother, say, or some other near relation, being so far away that one could never tell with certainty what part of the world he was in. And the Baron agreed that only a man without a family could lead such a life. A sailor's life, he added. But Joachim, not wishing to be outshone too much by his friend, and feeling, indeed, that here he was nothing less than his friend's deputy, now related that Bertrand had encouraged him to report for the colonial service, and the Baroness said with severity: "You can't do that and leave your parents alone." "No," said the Baron, "your place is in your father's fields," and Joachim was rather pleased to hear it. Then they turned back and, led by Elisabeth's dog, reached again the wide clearing in front of the house. The moist and dewy fragrance of the grass was already rising, and the lights in the house were being lit, for the evenings were beginning to draw in.

When Joachim drove away darkness was falling. The last he saw of Elisabeth was her silhouette on the terrace; she had taken off her garden hat and in the twilight of the fading day she stood against the clear sky which was ribbed with reddish bars of cloud. Joachim could see distinctly the heavy knot of hair at the nape of her neck, and he asked himself why it was that he thought this girl so beautiful, so beautiful that Ruzena's sweetness seemed to vanish from his memory when he saw her. And yet it was for Ruzena that he longed, and not for Elisabeth's purity. Why was Elisabeth beautiful? The trees beside the road rose darkly and the dust smelt cool, as it would smell probably in a cave or a cellar. But in the west a reddish strip still hung in the darkening sky over the rolling landscape.

On the same afternoon that Joachim paid his visit to Lestow, and just after he had driven away, Herr von Pasenow climbed the stairs to the first floor and knocked at Bertrand's door: "I must pay you a visit too …" and then as if in secret understanding "I've got rid of him,… it wasn't an easy business!" Bertrand murmured a few polite words: he would have been delighted to come down. "No," said Herr von Pasenow, "good form must be preserved. But after tea we'll go for a little walk. I've some things I want to talk to you about." He sat down for a little to preserve the form of his visit, but with his accustomed restlessness presently left the room, to return before the door was closed after him and say: "I only want to see that you have everything you need. In this house you can't depend on anybody." He walked round the room, regarded *La Mêre des Gracches*, examined the floor, and then said genially: "Well then, till tea-time."—

Having lighted their cigars they strolled through the park, crossed the kitchen gardens, on whose trees the fruit was already ripening, and at last reached the fields. Herr von Pasenow was obviously in a good humour. A group of women harvest workers came towards them. So as to make place for the gentlemen they formed up in single file at the side of the path, and one after another curtsied as they passed. Herr von Pasenow peered at each one under her head-cloth, and when the single file had passed he said: "Stalwart wenches." "Poles?" asked Bertrand. "Of course, that is, the most of them … well, they're an unreliable pack." It was lovely here, Bertrand went on, and he sincerely envied the life of a country gentleman. Herr von Pasenow clapped him on the shoulder: "You could lead it if you liked." Bertrand shook his head: that wasn't such a simple matter, and besides one had to be brought up to it. "I'll see to that," Herr von Pasenow replied with a confidential smile. Then he became silent and Bertrand waited. But Herr von Pasenow seemed to have forgotten what he had wanted to say, for after a long pause he gave utterance to the outcome of his thoughts: "Of course you must write me … often, yes." Then: "If you'll come and live here we need have no more fears: both of us need have no more fears … what?" He had put his hand on Bertrand's arm, and gazed at him anxiously. "But, Herr von Pasenow, why should we have any fears?" Herr von Pasenow seemed astonished: "But you said …" he stared in front of him. "Well, it doesn't matter …" He remained standing, then turned round, and it looked as though he were about to turn back again. But he

recollected himself and went on. After a while he asked: “Have you been to see him yet?” “Him?” “Well, to see the grave.” Bertrand felt a little ashamed; but in the atmosphere of this house there had really been no fitting opportunity to express a wish to visit the grave. As he was preparing to answer the question as diplomatically as possible in the negative, Herr von Pasenow laughed and said with satisfaction: “Well, then we have still something to do,” and as another pleasant surprise for his guest pointed with his stick at the wall of the cemetery, which lay before them. “You go in, I’ll wait for you here,” he commanded, and when Bertrand hesitated for a little he added impatiently and sharply: “No, I’m not coming with you,” and he led Bertrand as far as the gate, over which in golden letters glittered the inscription: “Rest in Peace.” Bertrand entered and after he had remained for a due period by the grave returned again. Herr von Pasenow was marching backwards and forwards along the wall with visible impatience: “Were you with him? … well …?” Bertrand pressed his hand, but Herr von Pasenow apparently desired no sympathy and was waiting for him to say something; he even made a gesture as of encouragement, and when in spite of this nothing followed, he sighed: “He died for the honour of his name … yes, and meanwhile Joachim pays visits.” Once more he pointed with his stick, this time in the direction of Lestow. Later with a titter he supplemented his thought: “I’ve sent him a-courting,” and as though this reminded him that he had something he wished to discuss with Bertrand: “Right! I’m told you’re good at business matters.” Well, yes, but only in his special branch, replied Bertrand. “Well, for our business that will do well enough. You see, my dear fellow, I’m naturally in need of advice now that he’s dead.” He paused for a little and then said importantly: “Question of inheritance.” Bertrand replied that Herr von Pasenow must surely have a confidential legal adviser who would guide him, but Herr von Pasenow paid no attention: “Joachim will be provided for through his marriage; he could be disinherited”; and he laughed again. Bertrand tried to turn the conversation and pointed to a hare: “They’ll soon be out with the guns again, Herr von Pasenow.” “Yes, yes, he can come to the shooting if he likes; he’s all right for things like that.… we’ll invite him, what? and of course he must write to us; we’ll soon bring him up to the scratch there, what?” As Herr von Pasenow laughed, Bertrand smiled too, though he felt very uncomfortable. He was a little annoyed at Joachim for delivering him up to this man; but how incapable the fellow showed himself even here to have allowed this old dotard to get into such a mood! Had the clumsy creature invited him here too, to straighten out his affairs? So he said: “Yes, yes, Herr von Pasenow, we’ll soon lick him into shape.” And this appeared to be the tone that the old man wished him to adopt. He leant on Bertrand’s arm, carefully suiting his step to that of his companion, and did not remove his arm again even when they reached the house. Though darkness had fallen they walked up and down the yard until Joachim drove up. When Joachim jumped down from the gig Herr von Pasenow said: “Let me introduce my friend, Herr von Bertrand,” and with a somewhat casual wave of the hand: “and this is my son … just back from his courting,” he added facetiously. The smell of the byres came across on the wind, and Herr von Pasenow felt in good spirits.

“She isn’t really beautiful,” Bertrand told himself as he regarded Elisabeth sitting at the piano; “her mouth is too large and her lips are of a curiously soft and almost evil sensuality. But when she smiles she’s charming.”

It was to a “musical tea” that Joachim and Bertrand had been invited. Elisabeth’s accompanists in Spohr’s trio were an old friend from a neighbouring estate and the indigent local teacher, and when the silvery crystalline drops of the piano fell into the brown stream of the two stringed instruments it seemed to Joachim that it was all due to Elisabeth. He loved music, although he did not understand much about it, but now he thought he had caught its meaning; it was pure and clear and hovered high above everything as on a silvery cloud, and from its celestial height let fall its cold and pure drops on the earth. And perhaps only to Elisabeth did it manifest itself, even though Bertrand, as he remembered from the days in Culm, could play a little on the violin. No, it did not look as if Bertrand would try to conquer Elisabeth from the musical side. When asked about his violin-playing he had replied evasively, with a deprecatory wave of the hand; and it may have been pure hypocrisy—for it had sounded cynical enough—when on the way back he had found nothing better to say than: “If she would only play something else than that horribly boring Spohr!”—

They had arranged to go riding: Joachim and Bertrand called for Elisabeth. Joachim rode Helmuth’s horse, which had now once more become his property. They galloped over the stubble-fields where the shocks were still standing, and then at a sharp trot turned into a narrow forest-path. Joachim let his friend ride in front with Elisabeth, and while he followed it seemed to him that in her long black riding-habit she looked still taller and slenderer than usual. He would have liked to turn away his eyes, but she did not sit quite faultlessly on her horse and it disturbed him; she bent a little too far forward as she sat, and as she rose and sank, touching the saddle and then rebounding again, up and down, he could not but recall the day when he had said good-bye to her in the station, and the despicable wish that he could desire her as a

woman rose up again, doubly despicable since his father, and before Bertrand too, had spoken of his courting. But almost more loathsome was the thought that Elisabeth's parents too, yes, her very mother, might regard him as an object of desire for their daughter, hold him up to her as an attraction, both of them persuaded that they might reckon upon this desire, that it would appear and that it would not fail their expectations. Yet something more essential, more profound, remained still concealed behind all this, an indefinite idea of which Joachim desired to remain ignorant, although he felt his mouth becoming dry and his face hot; it was indefinite, and yet it made him angry that they should dare to consider Elisabeth capable of such things; he felt ashamed before her and ashamed for her. Let Bertrand have her if he wanted to, he thought, forgetting that in doing so he was committing the selfsame offence which he had just rejected with such indignation. But suddenly that did not matter, suddenly it seemed to him that Bertrand did not come into the question: with his wavy hair he was so feminine, in some way sisterly, with a sisterly solicitude to which perhaps Elisabeth could be safely confided. That was not quite true, of course, yet for a moment it was reassuring. Besides, what was it really that made her beautiful? And he contemplated her body bobbing up and down and her hips returning to the saddle again and again. And doing this he discovered that it was not beauty, but far more truly the opposite of beauty, that awakened desire; but he pushed the thought aside, and the picture of Elisabeth clambering into her carriage still in his mind, his thoughts flew to Ruzena, whose countless imperfections made her so charming. He let his horse fall into a walk to increase the distance between him and the couple in front, and drew Ruzena's last letter from his breast-pocket. The notepaper smelt of the perfume which he had given her, and he breathed again the air of their illicit intimacy. Yes, that was where he belonged, that was where he wanted to be, and he felt he was a voluntary exile from society, and yet an outcast; he felt unworthy of Elisabeth. Bertrand was his accomplice, true, but Bertrand had the cleaner hands, and when Joachim recognized this he saw too why Bertrand had always treated him and Ruzena with a touch of superiority, of the avuncular, as a doctor might treat one, and had kept his own secrets hidden. A father's secrets should never be uncovered; that was as it should be, and yet because of it that fellow in front of him was in a position, was at liberty, to ride by Elisabeth's side, though he too was unworthy, yet better than Joachim himself. He thought of Helmuth. And as though he wanted Helmuth's horse at least to be beside them, he set it to a trot. Its hoofs thudded softly on the leafy ground, and when they encountered a twig he could hear the sharp cracking of the wood. The leather of the saddle creaked pleasantly, and from the darkness of the leafage came a cool wind.

He overtook them at the border of a long clearing which rose gently. The coolness of the woods was as if cut off here, and one could smell the sun's heat rising from the grass. With the lash of her riding-whip Elisabeth flicked at the horse-flies that had fixed themselves to her mount, and the horse, which knew the way, was impatient, awaiting its usual gallop over the clearing. Joachim felt superior to Bertrand; no matter how wide his business interests might be, at a desk one did not acquire the practice necessary to leap over obstacles. Elisabeth pointed out the hurdles, a hedge which she was accustomed to take, a fallen tree-trunk, and a ditch. They were not difficult. The groom was left behind at the edge of the clearing: Elisabeth took the lead, and Joachim again came last, not merely out of politeness, but because he wanted to see how Bertrand would take the jumps. The grass had not yet been mown, and it rustled lightly and sharply against the legs of the horses. Elisabeth rode first towards the ditch; it was a mere trifle, and it was only to be expected that Bertrand would take it. But when the hedge too was taken by Bertrand in good style Joachim felt really annoyed; the tree-trunk was far too easy, his last hope was gone. Joachim's horse, which was trying to overhaul the others, was pulling hard at the curb, and Joachim had to hold it back to preserve his distance. Now came the tree-trunk; Elisabeth and Bertrand had negotiated it easily, almost elegantly; and Joachim gave his horse a free head for the leap. But when it was gathering itself for the jump he checked it suddenly, why he was never able to tell; the horse stumbled on the trunk, came down sideways and rolled over him on the grass. This of course happened very quickly, and when the other two turned round he and the horse were quietly standing together in front of the trunk, the bridle still in his hands. "What's happened?" Happened? He didn't know himself: he examined his horse's legs, it was lame in one forefoot; it would have to be taken home. The finger of God, thought Joachim; it was not Bertrand but himself who had fallen, and now it was only right and just that he must go away and leave Elisabeth with that fellow. When Elisabeth suggested that he should take her groom's mount and send him back with the lame horse, he declined morosely, for he still saw in the incident a judgment from God. And after all it was Helmuth's horse and it could not be entrusted to anyone. He started for home at a walking pace and resolved to return to Berlin as soon as possible.

They rode side by side along the forest-path. Although the groom followed at a short distance Elisabeth had the feeling that she was deserted by Joachim, a feeling which acutely depressed her. Perhaps she felt Bertrand's glance hovering round her face. "Her mouth is strange," Bertrand told himself, "and her eyes

have that clearness which I love so much. She would be an easily wounded and provoking and really difficult mistress. Her hands are too big for a woman, thin and slender. She's a sensual boy, that's what she is. But she's charming." To escape from her depression Elisabeth tried to start a conversation, although a little time before she had already made the remark with which she began:

"Herr von Pasenow has told us a lot about you and your great travels."

"Yes? He has told me a lot about your great beauty."

Elisabeth did not reply.

"Doesn't that please you?"

"I have no wish to hear anything about my alleged beauty."

"You are very beautiful."

Elisabeth said a little uncertainly: "I didn't think that you were one of the lady-killers."

She's cleverer than I imagined, thought Bertrand, and he replied: "I couldn't bring myself even to utter that awful term, not even if I wanted to be insulting. But I'm not being a lady-killer; you know well enough how beautiful you are."

"Then why do you tell me?"

"Because I'll never see you again."

Elisabeth looked at him in surprise.

"Of course you don't like anyone to talk to you of your beauty, for behind the compliment you suspect the wooer. But if I go away and never see you again, then logically I can't be trying to court you and am justified in telling you the nicest things I can."

Elisabeth had to laugh.

"Dreadful that one can listen to nice things only from a complete stranger."

"At least one can believe them only from a complete stranger. Intimacy contains necessarily the seeds of dishonesty and falsehood."

"If that were true it would be really frightful."

"Of course it is true, but that doesn't make it at all frightful. Intimacy is the slyest and really meanest kind of courting. Instead of simply saying that one desires a woman because she's beautiful, one insinuates oneself into her confidence, so as to catch her off her guard."

Elisabeth reflected for a little, then she said: "Isn't there something outrageous behind your words?"

"No, for I'm going away … a stranger can afford to speak the truth."

"I'm afraid of everything strange."

"Because you're attracted by it. You're beautiful, Elisabeth. May I call you that for this one day?"

They rode in silence side by side. Then she said, finding the right words: "What do you really want?"

"Nothing."

"But then there's no meaning in all this."

"I want the same thing as everybody else who courts you and tells you for that reason that you're beautiful; but I'm more honest."

"I don't want anyone to court me."

"Perhaps what you hate is simply the dishonest form it takes."

"Aren't you really more dishonest than the others?"

"I'm going away."

"What does that prove?"

"Among other things, well, my modesty."

"How?"

"To court a woman means to offer oneself to her as the living biped that one is, and that's indecent. And it's quite possible, indeed quite probable, that that's why you hate any kind of courting."

"I cannot say."

"Love is an absolute thing, Elisabeth, and when the absolute tries to express itself in earthly terms, then it always turns into pathos, simply because it can't be demonstrated. And as the whole thing then becomes so horribly earthly, the pathos is always very funny, represented by the gentleman who goes down on his knees to get you to accede to all his wishes; and if one loves you one must avoid that."

Was his intention in saying this to intimate that he loved her? As he became silent she looked at him questioningly. He appeared to understand:

"There is a true pathos, and we call it eternity. And as there is no positive eternity for human beings it must be a negative one and can be put in the words 'never-to-meet-again.' If I go away now, eternity is here; then you will be eternally remote from me and I can say that I love you."

"Don't say such dreadful things."

"Perhaps it's the absolute clearness of my feelings that makes me talk like this to you. But perhaps there's

a little hate and resentment too in my forcing you to listen to my monologue, jealousy perhaps, because you'll stay here and live on."

"Real jealousy?"

"Yes, jealousy, and a little pride as well. For there's the wish in it to let a stone fall into the well of your soul, so that it may rest there for ever."

"So you want to intrude yourself into my intimacy too?"

"It may be. But still stronger is the wish that the stone may turn into a talisman for you."

"When?"

"When the man will kneel before you whom I'm jealous of at this moment, the man who will offer you with that antiquated gesture his physical proximity: then the memory of, let us say, an aseptic form of love may help to remind you that behind every pseudo-æsthetic gesture in love there is hidden a still grosser reality."

"Do you say that to all the women you run away from?"

"One should say it to them all, but I generally run away before it comes to that."

Elisabeth stared reflectively at her horse's mane. Then she said: "I don't know, but all this sounds strangely unnatural and beside the point to me."

"If you're thinking of the propagation of the human race, then of course it's unnatural. But do you find it more natural that some man or other, who lives somewhere at present, eating and drinking and looking after his affairs, will meet you some time by a stupid chance, and take a suitable opportunity of telling you how beautiful you are, getting down on one knee before you, so that afterwards, having gone through certain formalities, the two of you might produce children. Do you find that quite natural?"

"Be silent! That's dreadful! … That's horrible!"

"Yes, it is dreadful, but not because I speak of it as it is; for it's a still more dreadful thing to think that you're certainly destined, and very soon, to experience it and not merely to hear about it."

Elisabeth fought down her tears; she said with an effort: "But why, in Heaven's name, should I hear about it? … please, please, be silent."

"What are you afraid of, Elisabeth?"

She replied softly: "I'm afraid enough as it is."

"Of what?"

"Of everything unknown, of others, of what's to come … I can't express it. I have a desperate hope that what is still to come will be as familiar to me as everything that's familiar now. My father and mother belong to each other after all. But you want to take away my hope from me."

"And you refuse to see the danger because you're afraid of it. Isn't it one's duty to shake you awake so that you mightn't let your life run away, or dry to dust, or shrink to nothing, or something like that, out of mere indifference, or conventional notions, or ignorance? … Elisabeth, I mean very well by you."

Once more Elisabeth found the right words when she said softly, hesitatingly, against her will: "Then why don't you stay?"

"I've only been flung in your way by mere chance. And if I remained it would be as much an assault on your feelings as those I've been trying to warn you against; a somewhat aseptic assault, but still an assault."

"What should I do?"

"That can be answered only negatively: nothing that isn't approved by every fibre of you. No one can come to fulfilment except by submitting freely and absolutely to the law of his feelings and his nature—forgive the pathos."

"Nobody ever helps me."

"No, you are alone, as alone as you will be on your deathbed."

"It isn't true. It isn't true, what you say. I've never been alone, nor are my father and mother alone. You talk like that because you want to be alone … or perhaps because it gives you pleasure to torment me?"

"Elisabeth, you are so beautiful that perhaps your fulfilment and completion lie simply in your beauty. Why should I torment you? But all I've said is true, and I've not said the worst either."

"Don't torment me."

"Somewhere in everybody there's an insane hope that the little scrap of love that is given us will fling that bridge over the void. Be on your guard against the pathos of love."

"What are you warning me against now?"

"All pathos comes to this, that it promises us a mystery and tries to redeem its promise by a cliché. I should like to see you safeguarded against that kind of love."

"You're a poor creature."

"Because I show my empty pockets? Be on your guard against anyone who doesn't show them."

"No, not that. I feel that you're more to be pitied than the others, even than those others you talked

about.…”

“I must warn you again. Never pity anyone in this business. A love born of pity is no better than a love that’s bought.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, you won’t admit that, Elisabeth. Well, put it this way then: the woman who sins out of pity presents afterwards the most pitiless reckoning.”

Elisabeth looked at him almost with hostility: “I have no pity for you.”

“But you shouldn’t look at me so angrily, all the same, although it’s almost honester that you should.”

“Why honester?”

Bertrand was silent. Then after a while he said: “Listen, Elisabeth, one must carry even honesty to the bitter end. I don’t like to say such things. But I love you. I state that with all the seriousness and all the honesty that one can be capable of in these matters of feeling. And I know, too, that you could come to love me—”

“For Heaven’s sake, be silent …”

“Why? I don’t overestimate these vague emotional states in the least, and I won’t try to be pathetic. Yet no man can quench the insane hope that some time he’ll find that mystical bridge of love. But just because of that I must go away. There is only one real kind of pathos, the pathos of separation, of pain … if one wants to make the bridge capable of holding, then one must stretch it so far that no weight can be put on it. If after that—”

“Oh, be silent.”

“If after that necessity is still stronger than all that one has voluntarily set against it, if the tension of an indescribable longing becomes so sharp that it threatens to cut the world in two, then the proven hope may arise that the weak individual destiny of two human beings is lifted above the chaos of chance, above a stale and sentimental melancholy, above a mechanical and fortuitous intimacy.”

And as though he were talking to himself and no longer to Elisabeth, he continued: “I believe, and this is my deepest belief, that only by a dreadful intensification of itself, only when in a sense it becomes infinite, can the strangeness parting two human beings be transformed into its opposite, into absolute recognition, and let that thing come to life which hovers in front of love as its unattainable goal, and yet is its condition: the mystery of oneness. The gradual accustoming of oneself to another, the gradual deepening of intimacy, evokes no mystery whatever.”

Elisabeth was crying.

He went on softly: “I should like you never to know and suffer from love except in that final and unattainable form. And even if I should not be the one, I would not be jealous of anybody then. But I suffer and feel jealous and impotent when I think that you will put up with something cheaper. Are you crying because perfection is unattainable? Then you are right to cry. Oh, I love you, I long to sink in your strangeness, I long that you might be the final and predestined woman for me.…”

Now once more they rode on in silence side by side; they emerged from the forest and came to a field-path leading down to the main road which they had to take to get back. When he caught sight of the dusty road, which lay white under the sunlight and the pale sky, he drew up his horse so that in the shadow of the trees he might say again very softly, and as in farewell: “I love you … love you, it’s fantastic.” But that they should ride together after this on the dry, sunny road seemed to both of them impossible, and she felt grateful to him when he stopped and said: “I’ll try to overtake our unlucky friend, I think,” and then, very softly: “Farewell.” She gave him her hand. He bowed over it and she heard once more: “Farewell.” She said nothing, but when he had turned to go she cried: “Herr von Bertrand!” He came back; she hesitated for a little, then she said: “Till we meet again.” She would have liked to say “Farewell,” but it seemed out of place and theatrical. When after a little he looked round, he could hardly distinguish any longer which of the two figures was Elisabeth and which the groom; they were already too far away and the sun blinded his eyes.

Peter the serving-man stood on the terrace at Lestow and struck the gong. The Baroness had initiated this manner of announcing meals after a visit to England with her husband, and it had since become a custom. And although Peter the serving-man had been striking the gong for several years, he still remained a little ashamed of causing such a childish din, especially as the sound carried as far as the village street and had once gained him the nickname of “The Drummer.” Consequently he struck the gong discreetly, eliciting from it only a few deep tones that reverberated roundly in the silence of the park, and the rest of his performance was a flat, unmusical, brazen something that thinly died away.

Riding at a slow footpace through the noonday village street, Elisabeth heard the serving-man softly beating the gong and admonishing her that the time had come to change her dress. Nevertheless she did not

hasten her horse's pace, and if she had not been so lost in thought it might have struck her that to-day, perhaps for the first time in her life, she felt a sort of repugnance for the family gathering at the lunch-table, indeed that her return to the beautiful, quiet park, her entry through the gate with the two lodges, weighed on her with a feeling of heavy oppression. A disturbing longing for distant things had risen up in her and along with this longing an absurd idea, doubly absurd in this midday heat, that Bertrand could not thrive in this cold climate, and that consequently he had always to flee and always to be saying good-bye. The echoes of the gong had died away. She dismounted in the yard, the groom holding her horse by the bridle; she hurried into the house, the tail of her riding-habit over her arm; she went up the steps, went the familiar way, yet as if in a waking dream. A mild fit of courage came over her, a somewhat melancholy pleasure at the thought of going wherever she pleased, of taking her destiny in her own hands and directing it; but her thoughts did not go very far and remained held up by the question what her parents would say if she appeared at the lunch-table in her riding-habits. Joachim von Pasenow too was one of those who could be shocked by such offences. Her little dog Bello tumbled down the stairs barking, mechanically she gave him her riding-whip; but she did not smile at the pride with which he carried it to her boudoir, and artfully as he laid himself at her feet, devoutly gazing up at her as though he found in her beauty fulfilment and consummation, Elisabeth did not stroke his head, but went up to the mirror and gazed into it for a long time without recognizing herself, seeing only the slender black silhouette; and it was as though the figure in the mirror and she herself were receding from each other in an immobility which slowly dissolved only when the maid entered, according to the daily custom, to help her to take off her riding-habit. But while the girl knelt before her to pull off her riding-boots, while her outstretched feet slipped with a light, cool sensation from the long boots and lay, small now in their black silken stockings, on the maid's knee, she sought anew in the mirror that receding image, receding, as it were, in flight to someone or other who lived somewhere or other and perhaps would some day go on his knees before her. Her riding-whip was still lying on the carpet. Elisabeth tried to recall Bertrand at the railway station in his long, angular service coat, his sword by his side, and imagined that the departing train had caught him and was dragging him with it. There was a certain malicious pleasure in the fancy, but also a stifling fear such as she had never felt before. She sat with her head bent back, her hands at her temples, as though in this posture she could free herself from the power of an unexpected compulsion. "Still, nothing has happened," something said within her, and she could not understand her vague feeling of excitement, which yet seemed so strangely definite that it could almost be expressed in words: cut the world in two. It was not quite definite, certainly, yet a frontier line had been drawn, and what had once been indivisible, this closed world of hers, now fell asunder, and her parents stood at the other side of the frontier line. Behind all this was fear, the fear from which her parents wished to guard her as though their very life depended upon it; but the thing they feared had now broken in, strangely moving and exciting, and yet not in the least fearful. One could say "Du" to a stranger: that was all. And it was so little that Elisabeth became almost sad. She got up resolutely; no, she would not resign herself to a stale and sentimental melancholy. She went up to the mirror and patted her hair straight.

At the foot of the great staircase on an ebony frame hung the dull, yellow, bronze gong, decorated with flat Chinese designs. A genuine piece which the Baron had purchased in London. Peter the serving-man held the baton with the soft, grey leather head in one hand, while he gazed at his watch and waited. Fourteen minutes had elapsed since his first announcement, and when the watch-hand reached the fifteenth Peter would deliver three discreet taps on the bronze plate.

III

On the following day Bertrand excused himself from breakfasting with the family, then waylaid Joachim and told him that to his sincere regret he had been called away on business, and must leave the very next morning. Joachim's first feeling was one of relief. "I'll come with you," he said, looking gratefully at Bertrand, who had, it was obvious, given Elisabeth up. And to show him that he too would renounce her he added kindly: "I don't know of anything to keep me here."

Joachim went to impart this decision to his father. But when Herr von Pasenow started in surprise and asked suspiciously, with his usual indiscretion: "How is that possible? He hasn't had any letters since the day before yesterday," Joachim too was startled: how, indeed, was that possible? What could have moved Bertrand to the renunciation? And along with a feeling of shame at becoming his father's accomplice in indiscretion by posing these questions, the vision arose of a friendly triumph: it was because Elisabeth loved him, Joachim von Pasenow, that she had rebuffed Bertrand. Of course it was quite incredible that anyone should have had the face to propose to a lady so hastily, almost in the twinkling of an eye. But anything was possible to a business man who thought he had the chance of a rich heiress. Joachim was not able to

pursue these reflections, for he was startled by the sudden change in his father's appearance; he was huddled up in the chair by the writing-table and with a vacant stare was muttering: "The scoundrel, the scoundrel … he has broken his promise." Then he looked at Joachim and screamed: "Out you get, you and your fine friend … you're in the plot too!" "But, Father!" "Out you go, both of you; get out!" He had sprung to his feet, and advanced upon his retreating son, driving him in short rushes towards the door. And at every pause he thrust forward his head and spat at him: "Get out!" When Joachim was in the corridor the old man slammed the door, but opened it again immediately and stuck his head out: "And tell him not to dare to write to me. Tell him I've no further interest in him." The door crashed to and Joachim heard the key being turned.

He found his mother in the garden; she showed no great consternation: "He's not one to say much, but for some days he has seemed angry with you. I think he can't forgive you for not giving up the army. Still, it is queer." When they turned towards the house she added: "Perhaps he was offended, too, because you brought your friend down here so soon; I think it might be better for me to see him first alone." Joachim escorted her upstairs; the door giving on the corridor was locked, and there was no answer to her knocking. It was a little uncanny, and so they went round to the large drawing-room, since it was just possible that he might have left his study by the other door. Through the chain of empty rooms they reached the study and found it unlocked. Frau von Pasenow opened the door and Joachim saw his father sitting motionless at the writing-table, a quill in his hand. He did not move even when Frau von Pasenow advanced and bent over him. He had pressed so heavily on the quill-point that it was splintered; and on the paper stood the words: "I disinherit for dishonourable conduct my …" and then came the splutter of ink made by the broken quill. "In the name of God, what has happened?" But he made no answer. Helplessly his wife regarded him; when she noticed that the inkpot too had been upset she hastily seized the blotting-pad and tried to mop up the mess. He thrust her away with his elbow and then caught sight of Joachim in the doorway, grinned malignantly, and attempted to go on writing with the broken quill. When it caught again in the paper and tore a hole in it he groaned aloud, pointed his forefinger at his son and cried: "Out with him!" At the same time he tried to rise, but apparently found it impossible, for he collapsed again in a huddle, disregarding the flowing ink, and sank forward over the writing-table with his face on his arms like a crying child. Joachim whispered to his mother: "I'll call the doctor," and ran downstairs to send a messenger to the village.

The doctor came and sent Herr von Pasenow to bed. He administered bromide and spoke of a cold-water cure; it was simply a nervous breakdown following on the death of his son. Yes, yes, that was the doctor's banal explanation. But it was no explanation. There was more in it than that, and it could not be mere coincidence; the accident to Helmuth's horse had been a kind of preliminary warning, and now when, in spite of everything, Joachim was about to triumph over Bertrand, now when Elisabeth for his sake had rebuffed Bertrand and he was making ready to play Bertrand false and to play Ruzena false, ostensibly in obedience to his father, now was the hour for fate to strike. An accomplice who betrayed his fellow-accomplices; accused, and rightly accused, by his father of plotting with Bertrand! Must not the whole web now fall to pieces, and treachery cancel treachery? And Bertrand must appropriate Ruzena again to convince the father that he was no longer the son's accomplice and to avenge himself for Elisabeth's refusal! In all the foul and hateful suspicion with which Joachim now regarded Bertrand's departure to Berlin, he saw only his own departure postponed indefinitely, and that tormented him more than his anxiety about his afflicted father. The tangled web unravelled itself only to be knotted in fresh tangles. Was this what his father had in mind when he had pressed him to visit Lestow? And besides, it was impossible to discover what had happened between his father and Bertrand. Perhaps it might have been cleared up if he could have mentioned to Bertrand the old man's dark insinuations, but he had to confine himself to announcing his sudden illness. He begged Bertrand to explain the situation to Ruzena; in any case he would himself come to Berlin soon for a few days, to get his leave extended and see to other things. Well, said Bertrand, as Joachim escorted him to the station, well, and what was to become of Ruzena now? Of course it was to be hoped that Herr von Pasenow would soon recover, but Joachim's presence in Stolpin would none the less become more and more indispensable. "She ought to be provided with some regular occupation," he observed; "something she enjoys doing; that would help her over the difficult times ahead." Joachim was offended, for after all that was his own affair; he said hesitatingly: "But the theatre you got her into, she enjoys herself there." Bertrand dismissed this statement with a wave of the hand, and Joachim stared at him uncomprehendingly. "But don't you worry, Pasenow, we'll find something or other." And although it was a worry that had not previously occurred to Joachim, he was now sincerely glad to have it so lightly taken off his shoulders by Bertrand.

Since the old man's illness, which still kept him in bed the greater part of the day, life had become curiously simplified. Joachim could now reflect more quietly on many things, and some of the riddles

appeared less obscure, or at least more approachable. But now an almost insoluble problem confronted him, and it was no use trying to decipher it in Elisabeth's face, for her face itself constituted the problem. Lying back in her chair she was gazing at the autumn landscape, and her up-tilted face, thrown back almost at a right angle to the taut line of the throat, was like an irregular roof set upon the pillar of her neck. One could perhaps say just as well that it rested like a leaf on the calyx of the throat, or that it was a lid covering the throat, for it was really no longer a face, merely a continuation of the throat, an extension from the throat, with a far-off resemblance to the head of a serpent. Joachim followed the line of her throat; the chin jutted out like a hill, behind which lay the landscape of her face. Softly rounded the rim of the crater which was her mouth, dark the cavern of the nose, divided by a white pillar. Like a miniature beard sprouted the hedge of the eyebrows, and beyond the clearing of the forehead, cut by finely ploughed furrows, was the edge of the forest. Joachim was again forced to ask the question why a woman can be desirable, but nothing gave him an answer; it remained insoluble and perplexing. He shut his eyelids a little and peered through the slits at the landscape of that extended face. It blended at once with the real landscape, the woodland verge of the hair bordered the yellowing leaves of the forest, and the glass balls that decorated the rose-beds in the garden glittered with the same light as the jewel that in the shadow of the cheek—ah, was it still a cheek?—shone as an ear-ring. This was both startling and comforting, and when the eye combined these separate things into a unity so strange, past all disjoining, one was curiously reminded of something, transposed into some mode that lay beyond convention far back in childhood, and the unsolved riddle was like a sign that had emerged from the sea of memory.

They were sitting in the shady front garden of the little inn; their horses were in the yard behind with the groom. From the rustling of the leaves above them one could tell that it was September. For it was no longer the clear, soft purling of spring leafage, nor yet the full note of summer: in summer the trees simply rustle without much variation, but in the early days of autumn a sharper, silvery metallic tone is already perceptible, as if the broad harmony in the flowing sap were breaking up. When autumn begins the midday hours are quite motionless; the sun still shines with summer warmth, and when a lighter, cooler breeze comes wandering through the branches there is, as it were, a streak of spring in the air. The leaves that drop from the trees on to the rough inn table are not yet yellowed, but dry and brittle for all their greenness, and the summer-like sunshine seems then doubly precious. With its bow pointing upstream the fisherman's boat lies in the channel; the water glides past smoothly, as if moving in broad planes. These autumn days have none of the drowsiness of summer noons; a soft and watchful serenity lies over everything.

Elisabeth said: "Why do we live here? In the south there would be days like this all the year round." Joachim recalled the southern face of the Italian with the black moustache. But in Elisabeth's features it was impossible now to descry those of an Italian, or even of a brother, so removed were they from humanity, so akin to the landscape. He tried to find in them again their ordinary shape, and when it suddenly reappeared, when the nose became a nose again, the mouth a mouth, the eye an eye, the transformation was once more startling, and he was comforted only by the smoothness of her hair, which was not too insistently waved. "Why? Don't you like the winter?" "Your friend's right; one ought to travel," was her answer. "He wants to go to India," said Joachim, and thought of its olive-skinned races and of Ruzena. Why had he never once thought of travelling abroad with Ruzena? He was aware of Elisabeth's eyes on his face, felt caught, and turned aside. But if anyone was to blame for this fever for travel it was Bertrand. His need to compensate himself for the lack of an ordered life and to deaden his regrets by business deals and exotic journeys was infectious, and if Elisabeth was yearning for the south it was perhaps because she regretted—even though she had refused Bertrand—that she was not travelling by his side. He heard Elisabeth's voice: "How long have we known each other?" He cast it up; it wasn't so easy to determine; when he was a twelve-year-old boy home for the holidays he had often visited Lestow with his parents. And at that time Elisabeth was only a few weeks old. "So I've known you always, all my life," decided Elisabeth, "and yet I've never really been aware of you; I've always counted you among the grown-ups." Joachim said nothing. "And I suppose you've never been aware of me either," she went on. Oh yes, he said, he had, one day when she suddenly blossomed out as a young lady, all at once and most surprisingly. Elisabeth said: "But now we're almost contemporaries.… When is your birthday, by the way?" And without waiting for an answer she added: "Can you still remember what I looked like as a child?" Joachim had to think back; in the Baroness's drawing-room there hung a portrait of Elisabeth as a child that obstinately displaced the actual memory. "It's queer," he said; "I know very well what you looked like, and yet …" He wanted to say that he could not find the child's face in hers, although of course it must be there, but as he looked at her once more her face ceased to be a face at all, and was simply hill and valley again, covered with something called skin. As if she wanted to challenge his thoughts she said: "With a little effort I can see what you looked like as a boy, in spite of the moustache." She laughed. "That's really funny; I must try

to do it with my father too." "Can you see me as an old man as well?" Elisabeth eyed him keenly: "That's queer; no, I can't … but wait a minute, yes, I can: you'll be still more like your mother, with a nice, round face, and your moustache will be white and bushy.… But what about me as an old woman? Shall I create a very dignified impression?" Joachim declared himself incapable of imagining it. "Oh, don't be gallant, do tell me." "Excuse me, I'd rather not. There's something unpleasant in suddenly looking like one's parents or one's brother or anything else than oneself … it makes so many things meaningless." "Is that your friend Bertrand's opinion too?" "No, not so far as I know: why should you think so?" "Oh, only that it would be like him." "I don't know, but Bertrand seems to me so much concerned with the external details of his busy life that he simply never thinks of things like that. He is never fully himself." Elisabeth smiled. "You mean that he always sees things from a great distance? Through the eyes of a stranger, as it were?" What was she thinking of? What was she hinting at? He despised himself for his curiosity, he felt that he was unchivalrous, and at the same time realized anew that it was an unchivalrous proceeding to let a woman fall into another man's hands instead of shielding her, shielding her from everybody. Yet he was really pledged to marry Elisabeth. But Elisabeth looked far from unhappy as she said: "It has been lovely; but now we must go home for lunch, they're expecting us."

They rode homewards, and the tower of Lestow was already in sight when she said, as if she had been reflecting on their conversation: "It's queer, all the same, how closely intimacy and strangeness are knit together. Perhaps you are right in not wanting to think of growing old." Joachim, preoccupied with thoughts of Ruzena, did not understand her in the least, but this time he did not concern himself about it.

If there was one thing that contributed to Herr von Pasenow's recovery it was the mail-bag. One morning while he was still in bed the thought struck him: "Who's looking after the post-bag? Joachim, I suppose." No, Joachim wasn't bothering about it. He grumbled that Joachim never bothered about anything, but seemed relieved, insisted on getting up, and slowly went to his study. When the messenger appeared the usual ritual was gone through, and it was rehearsed as usual from that day on. And if Frau von Pasenow happened to be in the room she had to listen to the usual complaint that nobody wrote to him. He asked often enough if Joachim was about the place, but he refused to see him. And when he heard that Joachim had to go for a few days to Berlin he said: "Inform him that I forbid it." Sometimes he forgot this, and complained that not even his own children wrote to him; and this put the idea into his wife's head of getting Joachim to write a letter of reconciliation to his father. Joachim remembered the congratulations that he and his brother had had to inscribe on rose-bordered paper whenever his parents had a birthday; it had been a frightful torment to him. He declined to submit to it again and announced that he was going away. They could conceal it from his father if they liked.

He set off without enthusiasm; if he had once objected to having a marriage prescribed for him, he now rebelled in the same way against the fact that his three days' sojourn in Berlin plighted him to three nights with Ruzena. He found it degrading for Ruzena too. He would have preferred to put off their meeting as long as possible, and to prevent her at least from coming to the station he had omitted to mention the time of his arrival. In the train it occurred to him that he ought to bring her a present of some kind; but since neither partridges nor other game would have been suitable, the only thing he could do was to buy her something in Berlin; so it was a good thing she would not be at the station. He tried to think of a suitable gift for her, but his imagination lagged; he could not hit upon anything and wavered back and forward between perfume and gloves; oh, well, in Berlin he would find something or other.

When he reached his flat the first thing he did was to write a note to Bertrand, who would certainly be glad to have at last an opportunity of discussing with him the weird events of his last day at Stolpin. He wrote to Ruzena also, and sent both notes by a messenger with instructions to wait for an answer. He felt pleasantly at home in his flat. The warmth of summer still brooded captive behind the shuttered windows. Joachim opened a shutter and basked in the stillness of the street; it was late afternoon, rain might fall before night, there was a grey wall of cloud in the western sky. The vines on the fences of the front gardens were red, yellow chestnut leaves lay on the pavement, and the horses in the shafts of the four cabs at the corner of the street stood with their forelegs bent in peaceful resignation. Joachim leaned out of the window and watched his valet open the others; if the man had leaned out too Joachim would have smiled and nodded to him along the house-front. And while his bags were being unpacked he stayed there at the window, gazing at the quiet, darkening street. Then he drew his head in; the rooms had become cooler, only here and there a stray patch of summer still lingered in the air, filling him with a sweet melancholy. But it did him good to feel his uniform on him again; he walked about among his private belongings, surveying them and his books. Yes, he would do more reading this winter. Then he winced; in three days' time he was due to leave all this again. He sat down as if to show that he was a settled occupant, ordered the windows to be shut, and asked for tea. Some time later the messenger, whom he had forgotten, came

back: Herr von Bertrand was not in Berlin, but was expected in the next few days, and the lady had given no answer except simply that she was coming at once. To Joachim it was as if some slight hope had finally vanished; he could almost have wished that the messages were reversed and that it was Bertrand who was to come at once. Besides, he had intended to go out and buy a present. In a few minutes, however, the door-bell rang; Ruzena was there.

When he was a cadet and learning to swim he had balked at jumping in, until one day he was summarily thrown into the water by the swimming instructor; and after all it was simply pleasant in the water, and he had laughed. Ruzena came in like a whirlwind and flew to embrace him. It was pleasant in the water, and they sat hand in hand, exchanging kisses, and Ruzena babbled on about things that seemed irrelevant. None of his uneasiness remained, and his happiness would have been almost cloudless had not his vexation at forgetting Ruzena's present suddenly obtruded itself with renewed force. But since God had arranged everything for good, if not for the best, He led Joachim to the cupboard in which the lace handkerchiefs had been lying unremembered for months. And while Ruzena, as usual, made ready their supper, Joachim found tissue-paper and a light blue ribbon and slipped the package under Ruzena's plate. And before they knew where they were they had gone to bed.

It was not until next day that Joachim recollected how soon he must depart again. Hesitatingly he broke the news to Ruzena. But the outbreak of misery or anger that he had expected did not follow. Ruzena merely made the simple statement: "Can't go; stay here." Joachim was struck; she was right after all, why shouldn't he stay? What spell could it have been that made him stray aimlessly about the yard at home and keep out of his father's way? Moreover, it seemed imperatively necessary to wait in Berlin for Bertrand. Perhaps this was a breach of good form, a kind of civilian irregularity, into which Ruzena was enticing him, but it gave him a slight sense of freedom. He decided to sleep on the matter, and since he did so in Ruzena's company he wrote next day to his mother saying that his military duties would keep him longer in Berlin than he had anticipated; a duplicate of the letter, which he enclosed, was for her to give to his father should she think it expedient. Later he reflected that there wasn't much sense in doing that, since his father opened all the letters anyhow; but by that time it was too late; the letter was posted.

He had reported himself for duty, and was standing in the riding-school. The riding-masters were a sergeant-major and a corporal, each with a long whip, and along the walls was ranged a restive chain of horses mounted by recruits in coarse linen tunics. The place smelt like a vault, and the soft sand in which one's feet sank reminded him with a faint nostalgia of Helmuth and the dust he had strewn upon him. The sergeant-major cracked his whip and ordered a trot. Rhythmically the linen-clad figures by the wall began to bob up and down. Elisabeth would soon be coming to Berlin for the autumn season. But that was not quite true: they never came until October, nor could the house possibly be ready for them yet. And indeed it wasn't really Elisabeth he was waiting for, but Bertrand; of course it was Bertrand he meant. He saw Bertrand and Elisabeth riding before him at a trot, both rising and sinking in their stirrups. It was amazing how Elisabeth's face had melted into the landscape and how he had strained to recapture it again. He wondered if the same could have happened to Bertrand's face; he tried to imagine that one of the figures along the wall was Bertrand rising and sinking in his stirrups, but he abandoned the attempt; it was somehow blasphemous, and he was glad that Helmuth's face had been hidden from him. Now the sergeant-major ordered a walking pace, and the white jumping-posts and hurdles were brought out. He was involuntarily reminded of clowns, and suddenly he understood a saying of Bertrand's, that the Fatherland was defended by a set of circus clowns. It was still incomprehensible to him how he had managed to come a cropper over that tree.

He drove once more past Borsig's engineering works. Once more there were workmen standing about. He had really had enough of that kind of thing. It wasn't his world, and he had no need to barricade himself from it behind a gay uniform. True, Bertrand belonged to it, perhaps reluctantly, but still he was acclimatized; well, he had had enough of Bertrand too: the best thing after all would be to return to Stolpin. In spite of that, however, he stopped his carriage at Bertrand's door, and was delighted to hear that Herr von Bertrand was expected that evening. Good; he would look in anyhow for a few minutes, and he left a note to that effect.

They went together to the theatre, where Ruzena displayed her mechanical gestures as a chorus girl. During the interval Bertrand said: "That's no job for her; we'll have to find her something else," and Joachim once more had a feeling of security. When they were at supper Bertrand turned to Ruzena: "Tell me, Ruzena, you're going to become a famous and marvellous actress now, aren't you?" Of course she was, wasn't that just what she was going to do!"Ah, but what if you should think better of it and change your mind? We've gone to a lot of trouble to give you the chance of becoming famous, and what if you should suddenly leave us in the lurch and make us look silly? What shall we do with you then?" Ruzena became

reflective and suggested: “Well, there’s the Jäger Casino.” “No, no, Ruzena, one should never turn back when one has begun to climb. It must be something better than the theatre.” Ruzena began to cry: “There’s nothing at all for poor girl like me. He is bad friend, Joachim.” Joachim said: “Bertrand’s only joking, Ruzena.” But he himself was uncomfortable and thought that Bertrand was overstepping the limits of tact. Bertrand, however, laughed: “There’s no need to cry just because we’re considering how to make you rich and famous, Ruzena. You’ll have to keep all of us then.” Joachim was shocked; one could see how commercial life vulgarized a man.

Later he said to Bertrand: “Why do you torment her?” Bertrand answered: “Well, we have to prepare her, and one can operate only on a healthy body. Now’s the time.” He spoke like a surgeon.

What Joachim had half feared had now happened. His letter had fallen into his father’s hands, and the old man had obviously begun to rave again, for his mother wrote that there had been a fresh stroke. Joachim was amazed by his own indifference. He felt no obligation to go home, there was still plenty of time for that. Helmuth had charged him to stand by his mother, but it was little that one could do to help her; she would have to bear alone the fate she had taken upon herself. He wrote that he would come as soon as he could and stayed where he was, leaving things to take their own course, performing his duties, taking no steps whatever to make a change, and with an inexplicable fear thrusting aside every thought that suggested change. For it often required an actual effort to hold things firmly in their proper shapes, an effort so difficult that many a time all those people who bustled about as if all was in order seemed to him limited, blind and almost crazy. At first he had not thought much about it, but when for a second time he saw the military spectacle in terms of a circus he decided that Bertrand was to blame for everything. Why, even his uniform refused to sit upon him as well as formerly: the epaulets on his shoulders suddenly worried him, and the cuffs of his shirt, and one morning before the glass he asked himself why it should be on the left side that he had to wear his sword. He took refuge in thoughts of Ruzena, telling himself that his love for her, her love for him, was something exempt from all ambiguous conventions. And then, when he gazed long into her eyes and stroked her eyelids with a gently caressing finger, and she took it to be love, he was often merely losing himself in an agonizing game, letting her face grow dimmer and more indefinite, until it touched the boundary at which it threatened to lose its human character, and the face became no face at all. Things were elusive as a melody that one thinks one cannot forget and yet loses the thread of, only to be compelled to seek it again and again in anguish. It was an uncanny and hopeless game to play, and with angry irritation he wished that Bertrand could be saddled with the blame for that queer state of mind as well. Had he not, indeed, spoken of his demon? Ruzena divined Joachim’s irritation, and her suspicion of Bertrand, which had rankled in her since that last evening, flared out after a long, sullen silence with clumsy abruptness: “You not love me any more … or have to ask friend’s permission … or has Bertrand already forbidden?” And although they were angry and wounding words, Joachim was glad of them, for they came as a relief, confirming his own suspicion that the demonic root of all his afflictions was in Bertrand. And it even seemed to him like the final emanation of such an evil, Mephistophelian and treacherous influence that the aversion Ruzena shared with him should bring her no nearer, but rather, by provoking rude and uncontrolled outbursts, should put her more on a level with Bertrand and his equally offensive jokes; between his mistress and his friend, both unstable, between these two civilians, he felt as if caught and helplessly ground between two millstones of tactlessness. He felt the smell of bad company, and often could not tell whether Bertrand had led him to Ruzena, or Ruzena had been the means of bringing him to Bertrand, until in alarm he realized that he was no longer capable of grasping the evanescent, dissolving mass of life, and that he was slipping more and more quickly, more and more profoundly, into brain-sick confusion, and that everything had become unsure. But when he thought of finding in religion some way out of this chaos, the abyss opened afresh that parted him from the civilians, for it was on the other side of the abyss that there stood the civilian Bertrand, a Freethinker, and the Catholic Ruzena, both beyond his reach, and it almost looked as if they exulted in his isolation.

He was glad that he was due for church parade on Sunday. But even into this military rite he was dogged by civilian values. For the faces of the rank and file who had marched, as enjoined, in two parallel columns into the House of God, were the everyday faces of the drill-ground and the riding-school; not one of them was devout, not one was solemn. The men must have been recruited from Borsig’s engineering works; real peasants’ sons from the country would not have stood there so indifferently. Except for the non-commissioned officers, standing piously at attention, not one of them was listening to the sermon. The temptation to label this ritual, too, a circus came affrightingly near. Joachim shut his eyes and tried to pray, as he had tried to pray in the village church. Perhaps he was not praying, but when the soldiers joined in the anthem, his voice raised itself among the others, although he did not know it, for with the hymn that he had sung as a child there rose also the memory of a picture, the memory of a small, brightly coloured holy

picture, and once the picture was clearly imaged he remembered, too, that it was the black-haired Polish cook who had brought it to him: he heard her deep, sing-song voice and saw her seamed finger, with its chapped tip, tracing its way over all that brightness, pointing out that here was the earth on which men lived, and up above it, not too remotely above it, the Holy Family sat peacefully together on a silvery rain-cloud portrayed in the brightest of colours, and the gold that adorned their garments rivalled in splendour their golden haloes. Even now he did not dare to recall how blissful it had been to imagine oneself as a member of that Catholic Holy Family, reposing on that silver cloud in the arms of the virgin Mother of God or in the lap of the black-haired Pole … that was a point he could not now decide, but he was sure that the rapture was permeated by fear at its blasphemous presumption and at the heresy in a born Protestant's yielding to such a wish and such imagined bliss, and that he had not dared to make room for the wrathful Father in that picture; he did not want Him there at all. And while he strained his attention and bent his will to realize the picture more closely, it was as if the silver cloud floated up a little higher, as if it even began to evaporate upwards, and with it the figures that rested upon it; they seemed lightly to dissolve and float away on the melody of the anthem, a soft effluence that in no way effaced the remembered imagery, but rather illumined and defined it, so that for a moment he was even inclined to believe that it was the needful resolution into evangelical truth of a Catholic holy picture: the Virgin's hair, too, seemed no longer dusky, and she was less like the Polish woman, nor was she Ruzena, but her locks brightened and became more golden, and might almost have been the maiden tresses of Elisabeth. All that was a little peculiar and yet a deliverance, a ray of light and the promise of coming grace in the midst of obscurity; for was it not an act of grace that permitted a Catholic picture to resolve itself into evangelical truth? And the fluidity of the figures, a fluidity as gracious as the murmuring of rain or the mist on a drizzling spring evening, made him aware that the dissolution he so feared of the human face into a blankness of mobile heights and hollows might be the first step towards its new and more radiant integration within the blissful company in the cloud, no mere rough copy of earthly features but an initiation into the pure image, the crystalline drop that falls singing from the cloud. And even if this more exalted countenance wore no earthly beauty or familiarity, but was at first alien and alarming, perhaps still more alarming than the blending of a face with a landscape, yet it was the first step upwards, the presentiment of an awful divinity, but also the surety for that divine life in which all earthly life is resolved, dissolving like the face of Ruzena and the face of Elisabeth, perhaps even dissolving like the shape of Bertrand. So it was no longer the childish picture of old, with an actual father and mother, that now displayed itself: true, it hovered still on the same spot, floating in the midst of the same silver cloud, and he himself still sat in the same way at the feet of the figures as once he had sat at his mother's feet, himself a boyish Jesus; but the picture had grown in meaning, no longer the imagined wish of a boy, but the assurance of an attainable end, and he knew that he had taken the first painful step towards that end, that he had entered upon his probation, although only on the threshold of what was to come. His feeling was one almost of pride. But then the blissful picture faded; it vanished like an imperceptibly ceasing rain, and that Elisabeth was part of it came as a final drop of realization from the veiling mist. Perhaps that was a sign from God. He opened his eyes; the anthem was closing, and Joachim thought that he saw many of the young men gazing up to heaven with the same trust and resolute ardour as himself.

In the afternoon he met Ruzena. He said: "Bertrand is right; the theatre is no fit place for you. Would you not like to have a shop and sell pretty things, lace, for instance, and fine embroidery?" And in his mind's eye he saw a glass door with a homely lamp burning behind it. But Ruzena looked at him quietly, and, as now often occurred, tears rose into her dark eyes. "Bad men you are," she said, and held his hand.

In view of his patient's fresh relapse the doctor had asked for a consultation, and it fell to Joachim, as a matter of course, to escort the nerve specialist to Stolpin. He regarded it as a part of the penance he was to undergo, and was more strongly confirmed in this belief when the doctor, with an amiable detachment, set to questioning him about the nature of the illness, the course it had previously run, and the general family situation. For these questions appeared to Joachim an inquisition, courteous enough, but none the less a keen and probing inquisition, and he expected the inquisitor suddenly to give him a severe look through his eyeglasses and to point an outstretched finger at him; already he heard the accusing damning sound of the frightful word: murderer. Yet the amiable old gentleman with the spectacles showed no disposition to utter that frightful but emancipating word, remarking merely that the shock of his son's death had certainly occasioned the deplorable symptoms that were now afflicting Herr von Pasenow, although the original roots of the malady might lie deeper. Joachim began to regard the specialist with mistrust and yet with a certain satisfaction, being convinced that a man who expressed such opinions was incapable of helping the sufferer.

Then conversation died away, and Joachim saw the familiar fields and trees gliding past. The rhythm of

the train had set the specialist nodding drowsily, his chin between the points of his stiff collar, and his white beard spread over his shirt-front. It was unimaginable to Joachim that he also might be as old as that one day, unimaginable too that the other had once been young and that a woman might have looked for kisses in his beard; surely some trace of that would still have been perceptible in the beard, like a feather or a straw. He drew his hand over his own face; it was an imposture on Elisabeth that of the kisses which Ruzena had given him in farewell not a trace remained: God was merciful to mankind in drawing a veil over the future, but pitiless in that He removed all traces of the past; would it not be merciful to brand a man's deeds on him? But God seared the brand only on a man's conscience, and not even a nerve specialist could discover it. Helmuth had been branded, and that was why he could not be looked at in his coffin. But his father too was branded; anyone who behaved as he did could not but look furtive.

Herr von Pasenow was out of bed, but in a state of complete apathy; nevertheless Joachim's presence was concealed from him in case he should have a fresh outbreak of rage. He met the strange doctor with indifference, but presently took him for a notary and broached the subject of making a new will. Joachim was to be disinherited for dishonourable conduct, yes, but he wasn't a hard father, he only wanted Joachim to beget him a grandson on Elisabeth. The child must thereupon be brought into the house and become the heir. After some reflection he added that Joachim must not be permitted to see the child, or it would be disinherited too. His mother hesitatingly informed Joachim of this, and, contrary to her custom, fell into lamentation: where was all this going to lead to! Joachim shrugged his shoulders; he merely felt again what a disgrace it was to have a parent who dared to mention the possibility of children by himself and Elisabeth.

The nerve specialist too had shrugged his shoulders; there was no need to give up hope, he said; Herr von Pasenow was still extraordinarily vigorous, but for the present there was nothing to do but await developments; only the patient should not be allowed to stay too much in bed, for that might lower his vitality, considering his years. Frau von Pasenow objected that her husband was very desirous of staying in bed, for he always felt cold, and it seemed, too, that he was tormented by some secret fear that abated only when he was in his bedroom. Well, of course, one must act according to the patient's condition, observed the nerve specialist; all he could say was that in the care of his colleague—here the local doctor bowed his thanks—Herr von Pasenow was in the very best of hands.

It had grown late, the pastor had turned up, and the evening meal was served. Suddenly Herr von Pasenow appeared in the doorway: "So, there are supper-parties here without my knowledge; apparently because the new master of the house has arrived." Joachim made to leave the room. "Stay where you are and keep your seat," commanded Herr von Pasenow, setting himself down at the head of the table in the big chair that was left vacant for him even in his absence; obviously he was somewhat conciliated by this discovery. He insisted on having the courses served to him again: "Things need setting in order here. Herr Notary, have you been properly looked after? Have you been offered your choice of red or white wine? I see nothing but red wine. Why is there no champagne? A will should have a bottle of champagne cracked upon it." He laughed to himself. "Well, what about that champagne?" he hectored the parlourmaid. "Must I go foraging myself?" The nerve specialist was the first to regain his composure, and to save the situation said he would gladly accept a glass of champagne. Triumphantly Herr von Pasenow surveyed the table: "Yes, things need setting in order again. Nobody has any sense of honour …" then in a low voice to the specialist, "Helmuth, you know, died for honour. But he never writes to me. Perhaps he's still resentful …" he thought it over, "or this pastor here intercepts the letters. Wants to keep his own secrets, doesn't want laymen to get a peep behind the scenes. But as soon as there's any disorder in the churchyard he'll take to his heels, the man of God. That I'll go bail for." "But, Herr von Pasenow, the churchyard is in the best of order." "Apparently, Herr Notary, apparently, but it's nothing but eyewash, only it's not so easy for us to discover it because we don't understand their language; they're quite obviously hiding from us. We others only hear how silent they are, and yet they're complaining to us all the time. That's why everybody's so afraid, and when a guest comes I have to take him out myself, old as I am," he, darted a hostile look at Joachim, "a man without honour of course can't screw up his courage to it and sneaks out of sight in the byre." "Well, Herr von Pasenow, you must yourself have to see often enough that everything's all right and inspect the fields; you must in any case go out." "I like doing it, Herr Notary, and I do it too. But as soon as one sets foot outside the door they often block the road completely, the air's so full of them, so full that not a sound can find its way past them." He shuddered, seized the physician's glass, and before anyone could hinder him emptied it at a gulp. "You must visit me often, Herr Notary, we'll make wills together. And meanwhile won't you write to me?" he implored. "Or will you disappoint me too," he looked suspiciously at him, "and perhaps conspire with the others? … he has tricked me already with someone, that creature there.…" He had sprung to his feet, and his finger pointed at Joachim. Then he seized a plate, and, shutting one eye as if he were taking aim, screamed: "I've ordered him to get married.…" But the specialist was

already beside him and laid a hand on his arm: “Come with me, Herr von Pasenow; we’ll go to your room and talk there for a little longer.” Herr von Pasenow gazed at him blankly; the other met his eye steadily: “Come along, we’ll have a little talk all by ourselves.” “All by ourselves, really? And I shan’t be afraid any more.…” He smiled helplessly and patted the doctor’s cheek. “Yes, we’ll let them see.” He made a contemptuous gesture towards the company and suffered himself to be led away.

Joachim had buried his face in his hands. Yes, his father had branded him; the blow had fallen now, and yet he rebelled against it. The pastor came up to him, and as if from afar he heard the banal words of comfort; his father was right in that, too: this minister of the Church was a poor makeshift, or else he would have known that the curse of a father lies irremediably upon his children; he would have known that it is the voice of God Himself that speaks through one’s father’s mouth and proclaims the hour of trial. Oh, that was why his father’s wits were clouded now, for no man could be God’s mouthpiece and not suffer for it. And of course the pastor must be a commonplace creature; for if he were really an instrument of God on earth he too would mouth strange sayings. Yet God had pointed the way to His grace without the mediation of priests; there was no getting away from that, one must win that grace alone and in suffering. Joachim said: “I thank you for your kindly words, Pastor; we shall certainly be often in need of your consolation.” Then the doctor returned; Herr von Pasenow had been given an injection and was now asleep.

The nerve specialist stayed in the house for two more days. And when shortly afterwards a profoundly disquieting telegram of Bertrand’s arrived from Berlin, and the invalid’s condition remained obviously unchanged, Joachim too was enabled to depart.

Bertrand had come back to Berlin. In the afternoon he went to visit Joachim, but found only Ruzena in the flat. She was tidying up the bedroom, and when Bertrand appeared she said: “I not speak to you.” “Hallo, Ruzena, you’re very amiable.” “I not speak to you, know what you are.” “Am I a bad friend again, my little Ruzena?” “Not your little Ruzena.” “Very well, then, what’s the matter?” “What’s matter! … know it all, you send him away. I spit on your lace-shop.” “All right, a lace-shop I may have, I don’t mind, but that’s no reason for not speaking to me. What’s the matter with my lace-shop?” In silence Ruzena went on putting underlinen into the chest of drawers; Bertrand drew up a chair and waited with amusement for what was to come. “If it was my flat, throw you out, not let you sit.” “Look here, Ruzena, in all seriousness what’s gone wrong? Has the old man been taken bad again, so that Pasenow had to go off?” “Not pretend you not know; I not so stupid.” “I’m afraid you are, little one.” She turned her back on him and went on with her task. “Not let you laugh over me … not let anybody laugh over me.” Bertrand went up to her and took her head between his hands to look into her face. She tore herself away. “Not touch me. First you send him away and then laugh over me.” Bertrand understood it all, except for the reference to the lace-shop. “Well, Ruzena, so you don’t believe that old Herr von Pasenow is ill?” “Believe nothing, you. all against me.” Bertrand grew a little impatient. “Apparently if the old man dies it will be just to spite the little Ruzena.” “If you kill him he die.” Bertrand would have liked to help her, but it was not easy; he knew that there was not much to be done with her in that mood, and he rose to go. “You should be killed,” said Ruzena in conclusion. Bertrand was amused. “All right,” he remarked, “I have no objection, but will that make things any better?” “So you have no objection, no objection?” Ruzena hunted excitedly in a drawer, “but make mock at me, yes?” … she went on hunting, “… no objection …” and found what she was looking for. Bristling with hostility, Joachim’s army revolver in her hand, she faced up to Bertrand. This is too silly, thought Bertrand. “Ruzena, put that down at once.” “You have no objection.” A touch of anger and even of shame prevented Bertrand from simply quitting the room; he took a step towards Ruzena with the idea of seizing the weapon, and all at once a shot rang out, followed by a second when the revolver that she had let fall hit the floor. “That’s really too stupid,” said Bertrand, and bent down to pick it up. The valet came rushing in, but Bertrand explained that the thing had fallen on the floor and gone off. “Tell the Lieutenant that he shouldn’t keep pistols lying about loaded.” The valet went out again. “Well, Ruzena, are you a silly goose or not?” Ruzena stood white and petrified, pointed to Bertrand and said: “There!” Blood was dripping from his sleeve. “Let me locked up,” she stammered. Bertrand took off his coat and undid the shirtsleeve; he had felt nothing; his arm seemed only grazed, but it would be necessary to see a doctor about it. He ordered the valet to call a cab. With some linen of Joachim’s he made a provisional bandage and bade Ruzena wash away the blood, but she was so upset and confused that he had to help her. “So, Ruzena; and you’d better come with me, for now I can’t let you stay here alone. You won’t be locked up if you’ll admit that you are a silly goose.” She followed him mechanically. At his doctor’s door he enjoined her to wait for him in the cab.

He told the doctor that by a clumsy accident he had had his arm grazed by a bullet. “Well, you’ve been lucky, but don’t treat the matter too lightly; you’d better lie up for a day or two in hospital.” Bertrand thought that this was exaggerated caution, but as he went down the steps he became aware that he felt dizzy. To his amazement he found no trace of Ruzena in the cab. Not very nice of her, he thought.

He drove home first and collected everything that a practical man of some standing needs for a sojourn in hospital, and after being admitted to a ward he sent a note to Ruzena with the request that she should come and visit him. The messenger returned with the news that the lady hadn't come home yet. That was strange and almost disquieting; but he was not in the mood to take any fresh step that day. Next morning he sent another message; she had still not come home, nor had she been seen in Joachim's flat. That decided him to send a wire to Stolpin, and two days later Joachim arrived.

Bertrand felt no call to give Joachim a truthful account of what had happened; the tale of an accident caused by Ruzena's clumsiness sounded plausible enough. He ended up: "Since then she's vanished completely. That might mean nothing at all, but a girl in such an excited state might easily do something foolish." Joachim thought: what has he been doing to her? But he was suddenly horrified to remember that often enough, sometimes in jest, but sometimes in deadly earnest, Ruzena had threatened to throw herself into the water. He saw the grey willows on the banks of the Havel, the tree under which they had once sheltered; yes, she must be lying there in the river. For the space of a heart-beat he felt flattered by this romantic situation. But then the horror of it flooded over him again. Inevitable fate, inescapable discipline of God! And if he had prayed in the church, while still full of hope before his visit to Stolpin, that his father's illness might not be a penance laid upon him, the son, but merely one of the chances of life, the finger of God now showed him that even that prayer had been sinful. One dared not question God's discipline; there was no such thing as chance; for Bertrand, although he had parted in apparent enmity from Herr von Pasenow and was now depreciating the revolver incident as a stupid accident, was only trying to disguise the fact that he was an emissary of evil, deliberately chosen by God and by Herr von Pasenow to discipline the penitent, to lure him into temptation, to lead him into snares, so that in his extremity he might learn that the tempted is as much to blame as the tempter, and with the same fatality, now and always, brings ruin on those nearest him, and that no effort of his can avail to cheat the Tempter of his victims. When a man has come to such knowledge, is it not better for him to destroy himself? How much better it would have been if the bullet had killed him instead of Helmuth! But now it was too late, now Ruzena was lying at the bottom of the river, staring with glazed eyes at the fishes darting over her in the grey water. Quite unexpectedly her drowned image blended again with that of the Italian at the opera; but that too vanished when Joachim discovered that the man under the water was really himself. Yes, in his own blue eyes was the unlucky evil glance that the Italians believed in, and it would serve those eyes right if the fishes were darting over them. Bertrand said: "Have you any idea where she might be? Let's hope that she has simply gone back to her home. I suppose she would have enough money for that?" Joachim felt annoyed by this question; it had a touch of the inquisitorial detachment of a doctor. What was Bertrand hinting at? Of course she had money on her. Bertrand did not remark his annoyance. "All the same, we'd better inform the police; it's not impossible that she may be wandering about." Of course they must inform the police; Bertrand was right, yet Joachim shrank from doing so; he would be questioned about his connection with Ruzena, and even though he told himself that it was unimportant, yet he feared that vague and mysterious consequences might follow. His connection with Ruzena had been all too long sinfully concealed; perhaps God had planned to have it brought to His notice by means of the police; perhaps this was another of the penances he must do, made still harder by the fact that the police office was situated in the Alexanderplatz, which he shrank more than ever from entering. Yet he rose to his feet. "I shall drive round to the police." "No, Pasenow, I'll arrange that for you; you're still too upset, and anyhow they'll suspect melodrama." Joachim was sincerely grateful. "Yes, but your arm …" "Oh, that doesn't matter; they're just going to discharge me here." "But I'll come with you." "All right, then, and I hope I'll still find *you* in the cab when I get into it again." Bertrand was once more gay, and Joachim felt secure. In the cab he begged Bertrand to tell the police to search the banks of the Havel. "Very well, Pasenow, but in my opinion Ruzena's long since back in Bohemia; a pity you don't know the name of her village, but we'll soon unearth it." Joachim himself was now surprised that he did not know the name of Ruzena's native village, scarcely, indeed, her family name. She had often in fun tried to make him pronounce these names, but he could never get his tongue round the foreign words and could not remember them. It occurred to him now that he had never really wanted to know them or to keep them in his memory; yes, almost as if he had been a little afraid of those harmless names.

He accompanied Bertrand through the corridors of the police building; he had to wait outside the door of an office. Bertrand soon came back. "They know it all right," and on a piece of paper he showed the name of a Czech village. "Did you direct them to the banks of the Havel?" Of course Bertrand had done so. "But, my dear Pasenow, there's something unpleasant for you to do this evening, for I can't do it because of my arm. You must get into mufti and hunt through all the cafés and cabarets. I didn't want to suggest that to the police; we can always do that later. They might pounce on poor Ruzena and arrest her in the middle of

some dancing-floor." Joachim had not thought of such a vulgar and repulsive possibility. Bertrand was indeed a disgusting cynic. He looked at Bertrand. Did the man know more? Mephisto alone understood what Margaret had to do penance for. But Bertrand's face betrayed nothing. There was nothing for it but to submit and accept the task Bertrand had laid upon him as a further discipline.

He had entered upon his degrading pilgrimage, asking questions of waiters and barmaids, and was relieved to be told in the Jäger Casino that nothing had been seen of Ruzena. But on the staircase he met one of the plump dancing partners. "Looking for your sweetheart, I suppose, dearie; has she given you the slip? Well, come along, you can easily get another." What did the woman know of his connection with Ruzena? It was possible, of course, that she had met Ruzena somewhere, but the thought of asking her sickened him, and he hurried past her and into the next café. Yes, Ruzena had been there, said the woman at the buffet, yesterday or the day before, that was all she could tell him; perhaps the attendant in the ladies' toilet could give him more information. He had to continue his sorrowful quest, again and again overwhelmed with shame as he interrogated barmaids and lavatory attendants, and learned that she had been seen or had not been seen, that she had had a wash, that she had gone away once with a gentleman, that she had looked quite down-at-heels. "We all tried to persuade her to go home, for a girl in a state like that is no credit to any café, but she just sat and said nothing." Many of these people simply addressed him at once as "Herr Lieutenant," so that the suspicion awoke in him that Ruzena had taken them all into her confidence, and had betrayed his love to all these people. It was the lavatory attendants to whom he was always referred.

And it was in a toilet-room that he found her. She sat sleeping in the corner under a burning gas-jet; her hand, with the ring that he had given her, lay limp on the wet marble of the washstand. She had undone her boots, and over one foot, which showed beneath her skirt, the shapeless, unbuttoned top of the boot hung down, showing its grey lining. Her hat had slipped to the back of her head, dragging her hair with it by the hatpins. Joachim would have preferred to turn and go; she looked like a drunk woman. He touched her hand; Ruzena wearily opened her eyes; when she recognized him she shut them again. "Ruzena, we must go." She shook her head, keeping her eyes shut. He stood helplessly before her. "Give her a good kiss," the attendant encouraged him. "No!" shrieked Ruzena in terror, springing up and making for the door. She stumbled over her unbuttoned boots and Joachim caught hold of her. "But you can't go into the street with your boots and your hair like that," said the attendant; "the Herr Lieutenant isn't going to do you any harm." "Let go; let me go out, I say," panted Ruzena, and into Joachim's face: "All over, you know it, all over." Her breath smelt foul and stale. But Joachim still barred her way, so Ruzena turned round, tore open a lavatory door and locked herself in. "All over!" she screamed from behind the door. "Tell him must go away, all over." Joachim had sunk on to a chair beside the wash-basin; his mind could grasp nothing, he knew only that this too was one of the trials sent by God, and he stared at the half-open brown drawer of the toilet-table, in which the attendant's few possessions—handkerchiefs, a corkscrew, a clothes-brush—were bestowed higgledy-piggledy. "Is he gone?" he heard Ruzena's voice. "Ruzena, come out," he begged. "Fräulein, dearie, come out," begged the attendant, "this is the ladies' toilet and the Herr Lieutenant can't stay here." "He must go away," was Ruzena's answer. "Ruzena, please, do come out," implored Joachim once more, but behind her bolted door Ruzena was mute. The attendant drew him by the sleeve into the passage and whispered: "She'll come out when she thinks the Herr Lieutenant has gone. The Herr Lieutenant can wait for her downstairs." Joachim accepted her suggestion, and in the shadow of a neighbouring house he waited for a full hour. Then Ruzena appeared; beside her waddled a fat, bearded, soft-fleshed man. She peered cautiously round with a curiously fixed, malicious smile, and then the man hailed a cab and they drove away. Joachim had to fight against an inclination to vomit; he dragged himself home, scarcely knowing how he got there, and perhaps his worst torture was his inability to rid himself of the thought that the fat man should really be pitied, because Ruzena was unwashed and had a stale smell. The revolver was still lying on the chest of drawers; he examined it, two shots were missing. With the weapon in his clasped hands he began to pray: "God, take me to Thee like my brother; to him Thou wert merciful, be merciful also to me." But then he bethought himself that he still had to make his will; and he dared not leave Ruzena unprovided for, or else she would be justified in all she had done to him, incomprehensible as it was. He looked for pen and ink. Dawn found him fast asleep over an almost blank sheet of paper.

He concealed his misadventure with Ruzena, being ashamed before Bertrand and unwilling to grant him the satisfaction of having been right, and although the lie disgusted him he reported that he had found her in her own room. "That's all right," said Bertrand; "have you notified the police? If not, she might get into trouble with them." Of course Joachim had not thought of that, and Bertrand sent a messenger with the

requisite information to the police. “Where has she been, then, for these three days?” “She won’t say.” “That’s all right.” Bertrand’s dry indifference irritated him; he had nearly put a bullet through himself and the fellow merely said: “That’s all right.” But he had refrained from suicide because he had to provide for Ruzena, and for that he needed Bertrand’s advice: “Listen, Bertrand, I expect I’ll have to take over the estate now; but Ruzena needs some means of livelihood and an occupation, and I thought first of buying her a shop or something of that kind …” (“Aha,” said Bertrand) “but she won’t hear of it. So I’d like to settle some money on her. How does one do that?” “You must make it over to her. It would be better, though, to allow her an income for a certain time; otherwise she would go through all the money at once.” “Yes, but how does one do that?” “Well, of course I’d be glad to arrange it for you, but it would be better to put my lawyer on to it. I’ll fix up an appointment with him for to-morrow or next day. But, my dear chap, you’re looking wretched.” That didn’t matter, remarked Joachim. “Well, what is it that’s pulling you down? You really don’t need to take this affair so much to heart,” said Bertrand with light good-humour. His ironical indiscretion and that flicker of irony about his mouth are hateful, thought Joachim, and from afar the suspicion again began to steal upon him that behind Ruzena’s inexplicable behaviour and her instability were hidden Bertrand’s intrigues, and that Ruzena had been driven into this folly by her connection with Bertrand. It was a minor satisfaction that, in a sense, she had betrayed Bertrand too with the fat man. The sick disgust that had overwhelmed him on the previous evening began to rise again. Into what a morass had he fallen. Outside the autumn rain was pouring down the window-panes. Borsig’s factory buildings must now be black with running soot and water, the paving-stones must be black, and the courtyard, that one could see through the gateway, a sea of black, gleaming slime. He could smell the smoke driven down by the rain from the blackened top of the long red chimney-stack: it smelt foul, stale, sulphurous. That was the morass; that was the natural setting for Ruzena and the fat man and Bertrand; it was akin to the night haunts with their gas-jets and their lavatories. The day had turned into night, as the night into day. The word night-spirit occurred to him, a word, indeed, that conveyed no clear meaning. Were there also light-spirits? He could hear the phrase, “virginal shape of light.” Ah, that was the opposite of night-spirit. And he had a vision of Elisabeth, who was different from all the others, hovering on a silver cloud high above the morass. Perhaps he had already divined this when he first saw the white clouds of lace in Elisabeth’s room and had longed to watch over her slumbers. She would soon be coming now with her mother, moving into the new house. Extraordinary that there must be lavatories there too; he felt it was blasphemy to think of this. But not less blasphemous was the fact that Bertrand was lying here with his golden hair waved, lying in a white room like a young girl. Thus darkness obscures its real nature and keeps its mystery intact. Bertrand, however, went on to say with friendly concern: “You are looking so wretched, Pasenow, that you ought to be sent on holiday, and a little travel would do you good, too. It would put other thoughts into your mind.” He wants to get rid of me, thought Joachim; he has had his way with Ruzena and now he wants to ruin Elisabeth too. “No,” he said, “I can’t go just now.…” Bertrand was silent for a while, and then it was as though he had divined Joachim’s thoughts and was himself forced to betray his evil designs on Elisabeth, for he asked: “Are the Baddensens in Berlin yet?” Bertrand was still smiling sympathetically, almost frankly, but Joachim, with a gruffness unusual to him, answered curtly: “They’ll probably remain at Lestow for some time to come.” And now he knew that he must go on living, that chivalry demanded it of him, lest another destiny should be ruined by his fault and fall a prey to Bertrand; but Bertrand only gave him a gay good-bye, saying: “Well, I’ll arrange things with my lawyer … and when Ruzena’s affairs are settled you should take a holiday. You really need it.” Joachim said nothing more; his decision was made, and he went off full of heavy thoughts. It was always Bertrand who aroused such thoughts in him. And with the slight straightening of the shoulders, almost as if at the word of command, by which Joachim von Pasenow sought to shake off his thoughts, suddenly it was as if Helmuth had taken his hand, as if Helmuth wanted to show him the way again, to lead him back into convention and order, to open his eyes again. That Bertrand, whose expedition the previous day to the police headquarters had certainly done him no good, was again fevered, Joachim von Pasenow did not observe in the least.

The news from his father’s sick-bed remained persistently bad. The old man no longer recognized anyone: he was sinking into a lethargy. Joachim caught himself entertaining the hateful-pleasant thought that now one could, in all security, send any letter to Stolpin, and pictured the messenger with the post-bag entering the bedroom and the old man incomprehendingly dropping letter after letter, incomprehendingly letting them fall, though there might be a betrothal announcement among them. And that was a kind of relief, and a vague hope for the future.

The possibility of seeing Ruzena again filled him with dread, although many a time when he came off duty it seemed inconceivable that he should not find her in his rooms. In any case he was daily expecting to hear from her, for he had settled the matter of her income with Bertrand’s lawyer, and could not but presume that she had been informed. Instead of a message from her, he got a letter from the lawyer to say

that the money had been refused. This would never do; he set out for Ruzena's flat; the building, the staircase and the flat filled him with profound uneasiness, indeed with an almost anguished yearning. He feared that he would have to stand again before a locked door, perhaps even be turned away by some charwoman or other, and much as he shrank from forcing his way into a lady's room, he merely asked if she were at home, knocked at her door and walked in. The room and Ruzena were alike in a state of dirt and disorder, neglected and barbaric. She was lying on the sofa and made a defensive, weary gesture, as if she had known that he would come. Haltingly she said: "Not take nothing from you. The ring I keep, souvenir." Joachim could feel no sympathy rising within him; if on the very staircase he had still intended to point out that he literally did not understand what she had against him, he was now merely embittered; he could see nothing in her attitude but obstinacy. Yet he said: "Ruzena, I don't know what has really happened …" She laughed contemptuously, and his resentment of her obstinacy and instability, which had injured him and done him injustice, reasserted itself. No, there was no sense in trying to persuade her, and so he merely said that he could not bear the thought that she was not even half provided for, and that he would have done it long ago whether they had stuck to each other or not, only he could do it more easily now because—and he added this deliberately—he had to take over the estate and so had more money at his disposal. "You are good man," said Ruzena, "only you have bad friend." That was ultimately what Joachim believed at the bottom of his heart, but since he did not want to admit it he only said: "Why do you think that Bertrand is a bad friend?" "Wicked words," replied Ruzena. It was tempting to think of making common cause with Ruzena against Bertrand, but was it not just another temptation of the Devil's, another intrigue of Bertrand's? Obviously Ruzena felt so too, for she said: "Must beware him." Joachim answered: "I know his faults." She had raised herself up on the sofa, and they now sat side by side. "You are poor, good soul, can't know how bad peoples are." Joachim assured her that he knew it very well, and that he was not so easily deceived. And so they spoke for a while about Bertrand without mentioning his name, and since they did not want to stop speaking, they pursued the theme until the brackish melancholy that flowed behind their words rose higher and higher, and the words were drowned in it and blended with Ruzena's tears into a stream that broadened and slackened more and more. Joachim, too, had tears in his eyes. Both were helplessly delivered to the senselessness of Fate, now they were aware that they could no longer find comfort in each other. They did not dare to look at each other, and finally Joachim's woebegone voice said: "Please, Ruzena, please take the money at least." She made no reply, but she had grasped his hand. When he bent over her to kiss her she bowed her head, so that the kiss landed among her hairpins. "Go now," she said, "quick go," and Joachim silently left the room, in which it was already dusk.

He informed the lawyer, so that the deed of settlement could be drawn up again; this time Ruzena would surely accept it. But the kindness with which Ruzena and he had taken leave of each other depressed him more than the helpless resentment he had previously felt at her incomprehensible behaviour. It was indeed still as incomprehensible and dreadful as ever. His thoughts of Ruzena were full of sad yearning, full of that reluctant homesickness with which, in his cadet days, his mind had turned to his father's house and his mother. Was the fat man by her side now? He had to think of the jesting insult his father had put upon Ruzena, and here too he recognized the curse of his father, who, himself sick and helpless, had sent a deputy in his stead. Yes, God was fulfilling his father's curse, and all he could do was to submit.

Sometimes he made a feeble attempt to find Ruzena again; but whenever he was a few streets away from her flat he always turned back or took a side-street, landing in the slum quarter or in the turmoil of the Alexanderplatz, and once even going as far as the Küstriner Station. He was entangled all over again in the toils, and had lost hold of all the threads. His one firm certainty was that at least Ruzena's income should be assured, and Joachim now spent much time in the office of Bertrand's lawyer, much more time than was actually needful. But the hours he wasted there were a kind of consolation, and although these dull and somewhat pointless visits could not have been very agreeable to the lawyer, and although Joachim learned nothing of what he hoped to learn from Bertrand's representative, yet the lawyer did not spare himself in going into the semi-relevant and almost private questions raised by his aristocratic client, applying himself to them with a professional interest which somewhat resembled a doctor's, but none the less did Joachim good. The lawyer, a spare man and quite beardless although he was Bertrand's legal representative, looked like an Englishman. When, after ample delay, Ruzena's acceptance finally came, the lawyer said: "Well, now we've got it. But if you'll take my advice, Herr von Pasenow, you'll allow the lady in question the option of taking the capital sum instead of the interest on it." "Yes," interposed Joachim, "but I arranged it so with Herr von Bertrand simply because …" "I appreciate your motive, Herr von Pasenow, and I know too—if you'll excuse me—that you are not much inclined to take any bull by the horns; but what I advise is in the best interests of both parties: for the lady it's a pretty sum of money, which in certain circumstances might set her up better for life than an allowance, and for you, on the other hand, it's a definite quittance." Joachim felt a little helpless; was it really a definite quittance he wanted? The lawyer remarked his

helplessness: “If I may touch on the private aspect of the matter, my experience has taught me that the best kind of settlement is one which enables one to regard a past obligation as non-existent.” Joachim looked up. “Yes, as non-existent, Herr von Pasenow. Convention, after all, is the safest guide.” The word “non-existent” stuck to Joachim. Only it was strange that through the mouth of his representative Bertrand should signify such a change in his opinions and even acknowledge a convention of feeling. Why did he do it? The lawyer went on to say: “So think it over from that point of view as well, Herr von Pasenow; and, of course, for a man in your position the loss of the capital is of no importance.” Yes, a man in his position; Joachim’s sentiment for his home welled up again, warm and comforting. He left the lawyer’s office this time in an exceptionally good mood, one might almost say uplifted and strengthened. True, he did not yet see his way clear before him, for he still felt bewildered in the invisible tangle that seemed to net the whole city, a tangle of invisible forces that could not be grasped and that made his dull, persistent yearning for Ruzena insignificant, although bringing new elements of anguish into it, yet that bound him in such a novel and unreal relation to Ruzena and to all the world of the city that the net of false brightness became a net of horror winding around him, within whose tangled confusion lurked the threat that Elisabeth too, on returning to the city, which was not her world, might be caught in it; that she, the innocent and untouched, might be caught and entangled in these devilish and impalpable coils, entangled by his fault, entrapped because of him, because he could not free himself from the invisible embrace of the Devil, so persistently did darkness threaten to cloud what was clear, darkness invisible, perhaps, and still far off, floating, perhaps, and uncertain, but as besmirching as what his father had done to the maids in his mother’s house. In spite of that, however, Joachim felt as he left the lawyer’s office that he had come to a turning-point, for it was as if Bertrand had denounced his lies through the mouth of his own representative; Bertrand it had been, Bertrand, who had tried to draw him into the invisible, impalpable net, and now his own representative had had to acknowledge that the position of a Pasenow was something other, something outside this city and its swarming creatures, provided only that one was willing to regard the whole mirage as non-existent. Yes, that was Bertrand’s message by his representative, and so the Devil at last was loosening his grip of his own accord; even the Devil was still subject to the will of God, Who, in the person of a father, demands the annihilation and the non-existence of whatever lies under a father’s curse. The Evil One had acknowledged defeat, and even though he had not expressly renounced his claims on Elisabeth yet, he had himself advised Joachim to obey his father’s wishes. And without consulting Bertrand in person Joachim resolved to empower the lawyer to pay out the capital sum.

Similarly without consulting Bertrand, Joachim put on his dress-uniform and a new pair of gloves when he was informed that the Freiherr von Baddensen and his family had arrived, and drove to visit them at an hour when he could hope to find the Baron and the Baroness at home. They wanted to show him the new house at once, but he begged the Baron first for a private interview, and after the Baron had taken him into another room Joachim straightened himself with a jerk into a correct posture, standing stiffly as before a superior officer, and asked for Elisabeth’s hand. The Baron said: “Delighted and honoured, my dear, dear Pasenow,” and called the Baroness in. The Baroness said: “Oh, I have been expecting it; a mother sees ever so many things,” and dabbed her eyes. Yes, he would be very welcome as their dear son; they could not think of a better, and were convinced that he would do his utmost to make their daughter happy. He would do that, he returned manfully. The Baron had taken his hand: but now, first of all, they must speak to their daughter about it; he must understand that. Joachim replied that he understood; and thereupon they spent another quarter of an hour in half-formal, half-intimate conversation, in the course of which Joachim could not refrain from mentioning Bertrand’s wound; then he took his leave briefly without having seen either the new house or Elisabeth, but that mattered little now, for he had all the rest of his life to see them in.

It surprised Joachim himself that he was not more passionately impatient for Elisabeth’s consent and did not feel impelled to shorten the time of waiting, and often it amazed him that he could not imagine their future life together. He could see himself, indeed, leaning on a stick with a white ivory crook-handle, standing beside Elisabeth in the middle of the stableyard, but when he tried to visualize the scene more closely the image of Bertrand always intruded. It would not be easy to tell him of their betrothal; after all it was Bertrand against whom it was directed and Bertrand from whom Elisabeth had to be shielded, and, strictly regarded, it had a look of treachery about it, since in a manner of speaking he had once surrendered Elisabeth to him. And although Bertrand deserved nothing better, yet he shrank from inflicting such a hurt upon him. Of course that was no reason for postponing the betrothal; but suddenly it began to look as if the betrothal could not take place at all unless Bertrand were previously informed of it. He was still in duty bound to keep an eye on Bertrand, and could not comprehend how he had so completely forgotten him for days together, as if he were already exempt from all obligations. Besides, Bertrand was probably still an invalid. He drove to the hospital. Bertrand was, in fact, still lying there; they had had to operate on him;

Joachim was genuinely upset to discover how he had neglected the patient, and now that he set himself to inform him of the approaching event he made it at the same time a kind of excuse for such remissness. “But, my dear Bertrand, I can’t always be plaguing you with my private affairs.” Bertrand smiled, and there was a hint of a consultant’s or a woman’s solicitude in his smile. “Go ahead, Pasenow, it’s not so bad as all that; I enjoy listening to you.” And Joachim related how he had proposed for Elisabeth. “I don’t know whether she will, I dread still more that she won’t, for then I should feel that I was irretrievably floundering again in all the awful complications of the past months which you have shared with me to a great extent, while with her by my side I hope to find a way into the open.” Bertrand smiled again. “Do you know, Pasenow, all that sounds very fine, yet I wouldn’t care to marry you on the strength of it; but you don’t need to worry. I’m convinced that you’ll soon be accepting congratulations.” What repulsive cynicism; the man was literally a bad friend, he was no true friend at all, even though one had to admit in extenuation that he was both jealous and disappointed. Joachim therefore ignored the cynical remark and fell back on his own train of thought, asking: “What shall I do if she says no?” And Bertrand gave him the answer he desired: “She won’t say no,” averring it with such conviction and certainty that Joachim once more experienced that feeling of security which Bertrand so often evoked in him. It now seemed to him almost unfair that Elisabeth should attach her preference to him, the unsure one, and renounce the sure and steady leader. And as if to justify himself a voice within him said: “Comrades in the King’s uniform.” And suddenly he had a vision of Bertrand as a major. But from what source did Bertrand draw his confidence? How could he be certain that Elisabeth would not refuse? Why did he smile so ironically as he said so? What did this man know? And he regretted having confided in him.—

As a matter of fact Bertrand could have found many justifications for an ironical smile, or more precisely a knowing smile; yet his smile was one of simple friendliness.

On the previous day Elisabeth had abruptly descended upon him. She had driven to the hospital and asked for him in the reception-room. In spite of his aches and pains he had gone down immediately. It was an extraordinary visit, and certainly outraged convention, but Elisabeth did not take any pains to conceal its irregularity; she was obviously in distress and went straight to the point:

“Joachim has made an offer for my hand.”

“If you love him, there isn’t any problem.”

“I don’t love him.”

“Then there isn’t any problem either, for I suppose you’ll refuse him.”

“So you won’t help me?”

“I’m afraid, Elisabeth, there’s nobody who can do that.”

“And I thought that you could.”

“I didn’t want to see you again.”

“Have you no friendship for me?”

“I don’t know, Elisabeth.”

“Joachim loves me.”

“Love needs some degree of cleverness, not to say wisdom. You must allow me to be somewhat dubious of his love for you. I warned you once already.”

“You are a bad friend.”

“No, but there are moments when one must be absolutely honest.”

“Can one be too stupid to love?”

“I have just said so.”

“Perhaps, then, I too am too stupid.”

“Listen to me, Elisabeth, we won’t touch on questions of that kind, for these are not the motives that decide our lives.”

“Perhaps I do love him … there was a time when I wasn’t unwilling to think of marrying him.”

Elisabeth sat in the large invalid-chair in the small reception-room and looked at the floor.

“Why have you come here, Elisabeth? Surely not to ask for advice that nobody can give you?”

“You don’t want to help me?”

“You have come because you can’t bear to have anyone run away from you.”

“I am serious in this … you mustn’t make a joke of it … too serious to endure your saying more of your abominable things to me. I thought I should find some understanding.…”

“But I must tell you the truth. That’s just why I must tell you the truth. You have come because you feel that I stand posted at some point outside your world, because you think that from my outpost there might be descried a third possibility beside the banal alternatives: I love him, I don’t love him.”

“Perhaps that is so; I don’t know any longer.”

“And you have come because you know that I love you—I told you that plainly enough—and because you

want to show me what my somewhat absurd conception of love leads to," he gave her a side-glance, "perhaps to discover how quickly estrangement can turn into intimacy.…"

"That's not true!"

"Let us be honest, Elisabeth; the question between you and me now is whether you would marry me. Or, to be more exact, whether you love me."

"Herr von Bertrand, how dare you take advantage of the situation in such a way!"

"Ah, you shouldn't have said that, for you know perfectly well that it's not true. You have a decision for life in front of you, and you can't simply take refuge in convention. Of course the only question is whether a woman can think of her man as a lover, and not whether she is willing to set up house with him. If there is one thing I can't forgive Joachim for, it's that he didn't frankly discuss this essential point with you, but went with his so-called wooing to your parents, literally degrading you. Mark my words, he'll be on his knees next."

"You're trying to torment me again. I shouldn't have come here."

"No, you shouldn't have come, because I didn't want to see you again, but, my dear, you had to come, because you l—"

She stopped her ears.

"Well, more precisely, you are on the verge of believing that you might be able to love me."

"Oh, don't torment me; have I not been tormented enough already?" With her hands pressed to her temples she lay in the easy-chair, her head thrown back, her eyes shut; that was just how she used to sit in Lestow, and this relapse into old habit made him smile and feel almost tender. He was standing behind her. The arm in the sling pained him and made him awkward. But he succeeded in bending down and touching her lips with his. She started up: "This is madness!"

"No, it's merely a farewell."

With a voice as drained of life as her face she said: "You shouldn't, you, of all people …"

"Who should kiss you, Elisabeth?"

"You don't love me.…"

Bertrand was now walking up and down the room. His arm ached and he felt feverish. She was right, it was sheer madness. Suddenly he turned round and stopped close in front of her: without his intending it his voice sounded menacing: "I don't love you?"

She stood motionless with her arms hanging, and let him bend back her head. In her very face he repeated his threatening words: "I don't love you?" And she felt that he was going to bite her lips, but it turned into a kiss. And while most incomprehensibly the rigidity of her mouth relaxed into a smile, her hands, which had been hanging limp, now came to life and raised themselves, with the outflow of her feeling, towards his shoulders to clutch them, never more to let them go. At that he said: "Take care, Elisabeth, that's where I'm wounded."

Horrified, she loosened her grasp. But then her strength forsook her: she collapsed into the easy-chair. He sat on the arm of it, drew out the pins of her hat, and caressed her blond hair. "How lovely you are, and how much I love you." She was silent; she suffered him to take her hand; she felt the fevered heat of his, felt the heat of his face as he bent close to her again. When he hoarsely repeated "I love you" she shook her head, but yielded him her lips. Then at last the tears came.

Bertrand sat on the arm of the chair stroking her hair gently. He said: "I have such a longing for you."

She answered weakly: "It isn't true."

"I have such a longing for you."

She made no reply, staring into vacancy. He did not touch her again; he had risen to his feet and said once more: "I have an unspeakable longing for you."

Now she smiled.

"And you are going away?"

"Yes."

She looked up, questioning and incredulous; he repeated: "No, we shall never see each other again."

She was still unconvinced. Bertrand smiled: "Can you imagine me suing for you to your father? Giving the lie to everything I have said? That would make it all the most sordid comedy; the most barefaced imposition."

She grasped somehow what he meant, but yet could not understand:

"But why, then? Why …?"

"I can't possibly ask you to be my mistress, to come with me … of course I could and you would end up by doing it too … perhaps out of romanticism … perhaps because you really care for me now … of course you do now … oh, my dear …" they lost themselves in a kiss … "but after all, I can't put you in a false position, even though it might perhaps mean more to you than … to put it frankly, than your marriage to

Joachim."

She stared at him in amazement.

"You can still think of such a marriage?"

"Of course; it's only"—and to escape from the unbearable tension into raillery he looked at his watch—"twenty minutes since we were both thinking of it. Either the thought must have been unendurable twenty minutes ago, or it's still endurable."

"You shouldn't make a joke of it now …" then in fear, "or are you in earnest?"

"I don't know … that's something no man knows about himself."

"You're putting me off, or else you take a delight in tormenting me. You're a cynic."

Bertrand said seriously: "Am I to deceive you?"

"Perhaps you're deceiving yourself … perhaps because … I don't know why … but something doesn't ring true … no, you don't love me."

"I'm an egoist."

"You don't love me."

"I do love you."

She looked at him directly and seriously: "Am I to marry Joachim, then?"

"I can't, in spite of everything, tell you not to."

She freed her hands from his and sat for a long time in silence. Then she stood up, picked up her hat and put in the hatpins firmly.

"Good-bye, I'm going to get married … perhaps that's cynical, but you can't be surprised at that … perhaps we are both committing the worst crime against ourselves … good-bye."

"Good-bye, Elisabeth; don't forget this hour; it's my sole revenge on Joachim.… I shall never be able to forget you."

She passed her hand over his cheek. "You're feverish," she said, and went quickly out of the room.

That was what had happened, and Bertrand had paid for it with a severe bout of fever. But that seemed to him right and fitting, for it relegated yesterday to a greater distance. And made it possible for him to regard Joachim, who now sat before him in the same building—could it be the same?—with his usual kindness. No, it would have been too grotesque. So he said: "Don't you worry, Pasenow; you'll come to anchor all right in the harbour of matrimony. And the best of luck to it." An unchivalrous and cynical fellow, Joachim could not help thinking again, and yet he felt grateful and reassured. It might have been the memory of his father, or only the sight of Bertrand, but the thought of matrimony was mingled queerly with the vision of a quiet sick-chamber through which white-clad nuns flitted. Tender and nunlike was Elisabeth, white on her silver cloud, and he recalled a picture of the Madonna, an Assumption, which he believed he had seen in Dresden. He took his cap from the hook. He felt hustled by Bertrand into this marriage, and was struck now by the bizarre idea that Bertrand only wanted to drag him back into civilian life, to strip him of his uniform and his standing in the regiment, in order to be promoted as Major in his stead; and as Bertrand gave him his hand in farewell he did not observe how hot and feverish it was. Yet he thanked Bertrand for his friendly words and took his leave, stiff and angular in his long regimental coat. Bertrand could hear the faint jingle of his spurs as he went downstairs, and could not help thinking that Joachim was now passing the door of the reception-room.

His suit was accepted. To be sure, wrote the Baron, Elisabeth did not yet want an official betrothal. She had a kind of shrinking from the final step; but Joachim was expected to supper next evening.

Even if it was not counted a definite betrothal, even if neither Elisabeth nor his future parents-in-law addressed Joachim with the familiar "Du," yes, even if the tone at the supper-table was almost formal, there was yet an unmistakable hint of festivity in the atmosphere, especially when the Baron tapped on his glass and with many fine phrases elaborated the idea that a family was an organic whole and could not easily admit a newcomer into its circle; but when by the dispensation of Providence a newcomer was admitted, then he should be admitted wholeheartedly, and the love that united the family should embrace him also. The Baroness had tears in her eyes, and took her husband's hand in her own while he was speaking of love, and Joachim had the warm feeling that he would be happy here; in the bosom of the family, he said to himself, and the Holy Family occurred to him. Bertrand would probably have smiled and made fun of the Baron's speech, but how cheap was that kind of mockery! The obscure witticisms that Bertrand used to fling about at table—how far away that was—were certainly more offensive than the deep feeling that informed the Baron's words. Then they all clinked their glasses until they rang, and the Baron cried: "To the future!"

After supper the young people were left alone to open their hearts to each other. They sat in the newly done-up music-room with its black-silk chairs on which were sewed covers of lace made by the Baroness and Elisabeth, and while Joachim was still trying to find the right words he heard Elisabeth say almost

gaily: “So you want to marry me, Joachim; have you thought it over carefully?” How unladylike, he thought; it might almost have been Bertrand speaking. What was he to do? Should he get down on one knee to follow up his suit? Fortune was kind to him, for the tabouret on which he had set himself was so low that when he bent towards Elisabeth his knees were in any case almost on the floor, and his attitude, if one liked, could have been construed as kneeling. So he remained in this somewhat constrained posture and said: “May I venture to hope?” Elisabeth made no answer; she had thrown her head back, and her eyes were half shut. As he now gazed at her face he was disquieted to find that a section of landscape could be transferred within four walls; it was the very memory he had feared, it was that noonday under the autumn trees, it was that blending of contours, and he almost wished that the Baron’s consent had been longer postponed. For more dreadful than a brother’s apparition in a woman’s face is the landscape that luxuriates over it, landscape that takes possession of it and absorbs the dehumanized features, so that not even Helmuth could avail to arrest their undulating flow. She said: “Have you taken your friend Bertrand’s advice on this marriage?” That he could deny without violating the truth. “But he knew about it?” Yes, returned Joachim, he had mentioned the proposal to Bertrand. “And what did he say?” He had only wished him luck. “Are you very attached to him, Joachim?” Joachim was comforted by her voice and her words; they brought him back to the consciousness that it was a human being and not a landscape that he was regarding. Yet they were disquieting. What was in her mind about Bertrand? Where was this leading to? It was somehow unseemly to spend this hour talking about Bertrand, although it was a relief to find any topic of conversation at all. And since he could not abandon the topic, and since also he felt it his duty to be absolutely honest with his future wife, he said hesitatingly: “I don’t know; I always have the feeling that he is the active element in our friendship, but very often it is I who seek him out. I don’t know whether that could be called attachment.” “Does he unsettle you?” “Yes, that’s the right word … I am always being unsettled by him.” “He is unsettled himself, and so unsettles others,” said Elisabeth. Yes, that he was, replied Joachim, and feeling Elisabeth’s look upon him could not help wondering anew that those transparent, rounded stars, set one on each side of a nose, could emit such a thing as a look. What is a look? He touched his own eyes, and at once Ruzena was there and Ruzena’s eyes which he had felt with delight through her eyelids. It was unimaginable that he would ever be able to stroke Elisabeth’s eyelids; perhaps it was true, as they said in the schools, that there was a cold so intense that it seared; the cold of outer space occurred to him, the cold of the stars. That was where Elisabeth hovered on a silver cloud, intangible her effluent, dissolving face, and he felt it as an agonizing impropriety that her father and mother had kissed her when the meal was ended. But from what sphere did Bertrand spring, whose slave and victim she had almost become? If Bertrand was a tempter sent to both of them by God, it was part of the discipline laid upon him that he should save Elisabeth from such earthly aggression. God was enthroned in absolute coldness, and His commands were ruthless, fitting into each other like the teeth on Borsig’s cog-wheels; it was all so inevitable that Joachim felt it almost a comfort to know that there was even a single road to salvation, the straight path of duty, although he might be consumed in following it. “He’s going to India soon,” he said. “Oh yes, India,” she replied. “I hesitated for a long time,” he said, “for I can offer you only a simple country life.” “We are different from him,” she returned. Joachim was touched by that “we.” “Perhaps his roots have been torn up, and he is longing to be restored.” Elisabeth said: “Every man decides for himself.” “But haven’t we chosen the better part?” asked Joachim. “We can’t tell,” said Elisabeth. “Oh, surely,” Joachim was indignant, “for he lives for his business, and he has to be cold and unfeeling. Think of your parents, think of what your father has just said. But *he* calls that convention; he hasn’t got real inwardness, real Christian feeling.” He fell silent: he hadn’t expressed what he wanted to say, for what he expected from God and from Elisabeth was not a mere equivalent for Christian family life as he had been trained to understand it; yet just because he expected more from Elisabeth, he desired to confine his words to the neighbourhood of that celestial sphere in which she was to manifest herself as the tenderest of silvery, hovering Madonnas. Perhaps she would have to die before she could speak to him in the right way, for as she sat there leaning back, she looked like Snow-white in the glass casket and was so irradiated by that higher beauty and heavenly essence that her face had but little resemblance to the one he had known in life before it blended so dreadfully and irrevocably with the landscape. The wish that Elisabeth were dead and her voice imparting angelic comfort to him from the other side grew and grew, and the extraordinary tension it engendered, or out of which itself had sprung, attained such force that Elisabeth too must have been affected by the onrush of terrifying coldness, for she said: “He doesn’t need the comforting warmth of companionship as we do.” Yet she disappointed Joachim by these earthly words, and even though the need for protection that echoed in them moved his heart and awakened in him the vision of Mary wandering on earth before her assumption into heaven, yet he realized that his strength was hardly equal to affording such protection, and in his twofold disappointment he wished with twofold earnestness a kind and pleasant death for both of them. And since the mask falls from the face that is confronted by

death, defenceless against the breath of the Eternal, Joachim said: “He would always have been remote from you,” and this seemed to both of them a great and significant truth, although they had almost forgotten that it was Bertrand of whom they were speaking. Like yellow butterflies with black spots upon their serrated yellow wings, the ring of gas-jets blazed in the wreath of the chandelier over the black-silk catafalque on which Joachim still sat motionless with his body stiffly inclined and his knees bent, and the white-lace covers on the black silk were like copies of deaths’ heads. Into that frozen stillness dropped Elisabeth’s words: “He is more solitary than other people,” and Joachim replied: “His demon drives him out.” But Elisabeth almost imperceptibly shook her head: “He hopes to find fulfilment,” and then she added, as if from a fixed recollection, “fulfilment and knowledge in solitude and remoteness.” Joachim was silent; it was with reluctance that he took up this thought that hung cold and bewildering between them: “He is remote … he thrusts us all away, for God wills us to be solitary.” “He does, indeed,” said Elisabeth, and it was not to be determined whether she had referred to God or to Bertrand; but that ceased to matter, since the solitude prescribed for her and Joachim now began to encompass them, and froze the room, in spite of its intimate elegance, into a more complete and dreadful immobility; as they sat motionless, both of them, it seemed as if the room widened around them; as the walls receded the air seemed to grow colder and thinner, so thin that it could barely carry a voice. And although everything was tranced in immobility, yet the chairs, the piano, on whose black-lacquered surface the wreath of gas-jets was still reflected, seemed no longer in their usual places, but infinitely remote, and even the golden dragons and butterflies on the black Chinese screen in the corner had flitted away as if drawn after the receding walls, which now looked as if hung with black curtains. The gas-lights hissed with a faint, malicious susurration, and except for their infinitesimal mechanical vivacity, that jetted fleeringly from obscenely open small slits, all life was extinguished. She will die soon now, thought Joachim, and it was almost a confirmation of it that he heard her voice saying in the emptiness: “His death will be a lonely one”; it sounded like a doom and a pledge, a pledge that he fortified: “He is sick, and may die soon; perhaps this very moment.” “Yes,” said Elisabeth from the other side of beyond, and the word was like a drop that turned to ice as it fell, “yes, this very moment,” and in the frozen featurelessness of that second in which Death stood beside them, Joachim did not know whether it was the two of them that Death touched, or whether it was his father, or Bertrand; he could not tell whether his mother was not sitting there to watch over his death, punctual and calm, as she watched in the milking-byre or by his father’s bed, and he had a sudden near intuition, strangely clear, that his father was freezing and longed for the dark warmth of the cowshed. Was it not better to die now beside Elisabeth, and to be led by her into the glassy brightness that hovered above the dark? He said: “There will be frightful darkness around him, and no one will come to help him.” But Elisabeth said in a hard voice: “No one should come,” and with the same grey, toneless hardness she went on speaking in the emptiness, adding in the same breath, that yet was not a breath at all: “I will be your wife, Joachim,” and was herself uncertain whether she had said it, for Joachim sat in unchanged stillness with his body inclined, and made no answer. No sign was given, and although it lasted no longer than the dulling and glazing of an eye, the tension was so charged with uncertainty and nullity that Elisabeth said again: “Yes, I’ll be your wife.” But Joachim did not want to hear her words, for they compelled him to turn back from that road on which there is no returning. With a great effort he tried to bend towards her; he barely succeeded, but his half-bent knee actually did touch the ground; his brow, beaded with cold sweat, inclined itself, and his lips, dry and cold as parchment, brushed her hand, which was so icy that he did not dare to touch her finger-tips, not even when the room slowly closed in again and the chairs resumed their former places.

So they remained until they heard the Baron’s voice in the next room. “We must go in,” said Elisabeth. Then they entered the brightly lit salon, and Elisabeth said: “We are engaged.” “My child!” cried the Baroness, and with tears enfolded Elisabeth in her arms. But the Baron, whose eyes were not less wet, cried: “Let us be joyful and give thanks to God for this happy day,” and Joachim loved him for those heartening words, and felt committed to his keeping.

Out of the apathetic doze into which his weariness declined amid the rattle of the droshky wheels as he drove home, the thought emerged more clearly that his father and Bertrand had died that day, and he was almost amazed to find no announcement of their death awaiting him in his flat, for that would have fitted in with the return of punctiliousness to his life. In any case one should not conceal a betrothal from even a dead friend. The thought continued to haunt him and next morning strengthened into something like certainty, if not a certainty of their death, a certainty of their non-existence at least: his father and Bertrand had departed this life, and even although he was partly to blame for their death, he remained sunk in quiet indifference and did not even once find it necessary to decide whether it was Elisabeth or Ruzena of whom he had robbed Bertrand. The task had been laid upon him to catch Bertrand from behind, to keep an eye upon him, and the path along which he was bound to pursue him had now come to an end, the mystery was

annulled; all that remained was to say farewell to his dead friend. “Both good news and bad news,” he said to himself. He had plenty of time; he stopped the droshky to order bouquets for his fiancée and the Baroness, and without haste proceeded to the hospital. But when he entered the hospital no one made any reference to the catastrophe; he was conducted in the usual manner to Bertrand’s room as if nothing had happened: it was only when he met the Sister in the corridor that he learned that Bertrand had indeed had a bad night, but was now feeling better. Joachim repeated mechanically: “He’s feeling better … yes, that’s gratifying, very gratifying.” It was as if Bertrand had betrayed and deceived him yet again, and this became a firm conviction when he was greeted by the gay words: “I take it you can be congratulated to-day.” How does he know that? Joachim asked himself, and in spite of his annoyance was almost proud that his suspicions were, in a way, justified by his new character as prospective bridegroom: yes, he said, he was happy to be able to announce his engagement. Bertrand seemed, however, in a softened mood. “You know that I like you, Pasenow,” he said—Joachim felt this as importunity—“and so it’s with all my heart that I wish luck to you and your bride.” Once more his words sounded warm and sincere, yet mocking: he—the man who always knew everything beforehand, he who had actually willed it and brought it about, although merely as the instrument of a higher power—was evading the issue, now that he saw his work accomplished, with a smooth and cordial congratulation. Joachim felt somehow exhausted; he sat down by the table in the middle of the room, looked at Bertrand, who was lying blond and almost girlish in his bed, and said gravely: “I hope that everything will turn out well,” and Bertrand replied lightly with that offhand certainty which always laid its soothing and yet disquieting spell on Joachim: “Let me assure you, Pasenow, that everything will turn out for the very best … at least for you.” Joachim repeated: “Yes, for the best …” but then he looked perplexed: “Why for me only?” Bertrand smiled and waved the question away with a faintly contemptuous gesture: “Oh, we … we’re a lost generation,” yet he explained himself no further, only adding abruptly: “And when’s the wedding to be?” so that Joachim forgot to ask more, and at once said: well, there was still some way to go; his father’s illness, above all, had to be considered. Bertrand eyed Joachim, who sat facing him with stiff propriety. “But getting married surely doesn’t involve settling down on the estate at once?” he said. Joachim was shocked: apparently all his trouble had been wasted. After harping on the necessity for taking over the estate, after plunging Ruzena into despair, here was Bertrand now saying that he did not need to settle down on the estate, as if wishing to cheat him of his pride in its possession and even to deprive him of his home! With what devious cunning had Bertrand lured him on, and now he was shaking off all responsibility and actually disdaining the triumph he had scored in pulling him down to his own civilian level, repudiating him even there! It must have been sheer evil for evil’s sake that Bertrand had wrought, and Joachim looked at him with indignant amazement. But Bertrand observed only the question in his eyes: “Well,” he said, “you mentioned not long ago that you were just on the point of getting your captaincy, and you should stay on until you’re promoted. Retired Captain sounds much better than retired Lieutenant”—now he’s ashamed of himself, the Second Lieutenant, thought Joachim and straightened himself with a little jerk, as if on parade—“and during these few months your father’s illness will have taken a decisive turn of some kind.” Joachim would have liked to point out that married officers seemed to him an anomaly, and that he was longing for his native soil, but he did not venture to say so, remarking merely that Bertrand’s suggested solution fitted in with the heartfelt desire of his future parents to see Elisabeth settled in the new west-end house. “Well, there you are, my dear Pasenow; everything turns out for the best,” said Bertrand, and that was another gratuitous and abominable piece of presumption, “besides, you could certainly speed up your promotion if you were to tell your colonel that you mean to retire from the service as soon as you get your step.” He was right in that, too, but it was annoying to have Bertrand interfering with even military arrangements. Joachim thoughtfully picked up Bertrand’s stick from the table, scrutinized the handle, and ran his finger over the resilient black-rubber bulb at the point of it: a convalescent’s stick. That the man was urging him into a headlong marriage filled him with new suspicion. What was behind it all? Yesterday evening he and Elisabeth had explained to her parents that they did not want to hurry on the marriage, and had enumerated all the obstacles; and now this Bertrand wanted simply to blow the obstacles away. “All the same, we can’t precipitate the marriage,” said Joachim obstinately. “Well,” remarked Bertrand, “I’m only sorry that in that case I must be content with sending you a wire on the happy day, from India or somewhere. For as soon as I’m half set up again I’m going abroad.… This affair has pulled me down a bit.” What affair? The slight wound to his arm? It was true that Bertrand looked ill, and convalescents always needed sticks, but what else had been happening? He shouldn’t really let Bertrand go away until that was all cleared up, and Joachim wondered whether Helmuth, who had faced his enemy openly, hadn’t been much more honourable than himself; was not the issue here the same: explanation or death? But Joachim wanted both of them, and yet neither. His father was right: he was dishonourable, as dishonourable as Bertrand, this friend of his, who could hardly be called his friend still. Yet that was almost gratifying, for it must have been in his father’s mind that Bertrand should not be

invited to the wedding.

None the less he listened quietly as Bertrand went on: “One thing more, Pasenow; I have the impression that the estate, except where your mother looks after it and where it runs itself, is in a fairly neglected condition. In his present state your father could possibly do it a great deal of additional harm. Excuse me for suggesting, as I feel bound to do, that you might have him declared incapable of managing it. And you should engage a good steward; he would anyhow earn his wages. I think you should discuss it with your father-in-law; after all, he’s a landowner too.” Yes, Bertrand was talking like the vilest *agent provocateur*, and yet Joachim had to thank him for the advice, which he could see was just and well meant, and even had to express the hope that they would still see much of each other before Bertrand’s full recovery. “Delighted,” said Bertrand; “and give my humblest respects to your bride.” Then he sank back exhausted on his pillow.

Two days later Joachim received a letter in which Bertrand announced that his health was much improved and that he had shifted into a hospital in Hamburg, so as to be nearer to his business. But they would certainly meet again before he started for the East. Bertrand’s cool assumption that as a matter of course they would have another encounter made Joachim decide to avoid it at all costs. But he suffered from the knowledge that from now on he would have to do without his friend’s sureness and lightness of touch, and his competence in the affairs of life.

Behind the Leipzigerplatz there is a shop which externally can hardly be distinguished from its neighbours, unless it should attract attention because there are no goods displayed in its windows and the eye is prevented from seeing what is inside by opaque-glass screens, beautifully etched with Pompeian and Renaissance designs. But this peculiarity is one which the shop shares with many banking houses and brokers’ offices, and even the posters affixed to the screens, although they are an unpleasant interruption of the designs, have nothing unusual about them. On these posters the word “India” occurs, and a glance at the sign above the door informs one that inside the shop the Kaiser Panorama is on view.

On entering, one advances first into a light and cosily heated room in which an elderly and obviously good-natured lady acts as a kind of cashier behind a small table, selling tickets of admission to the establishment. Most of the visitors, however, pause at the table only to have their books of subscription tickets stamped and to exchange a few friendly words with the old lady. When the aged attendant appears from behind the black curtains that cut off one end of the room, and with a deprecating little gesture begs one to wait a minute or two, the visitor subsides with a faint sigh into one of the cane chairs and continues his conversation, mistrustfully watching the glass door that leads into the street, and if a fresh client appears regarding him with jealous and ashamed hostility. Then there is heard the faint scraping of chairs behind the curtains, and the man who emerges blinks a little in the light, and departs with a brief salutation to the old lady, going hurriedly, nervously, and without looking at anybody, as if he too were ashamed. The waiting client, however, springs quickly to his feet lest someone should push in ahead of him, breaks off his conversation without more ado, and vanishes behind the protecting curtains. It happens but seldom that clients speak to each other, although many must get to know each other by sight in the course of years, and only one or two shameless old men bring themselves to address the other waiting clients as well as the cashier, and to praise the programme; yet even then they are answered mostly in monosyllables.

Within, however, all is darkness, and one could suppose it an ancient, oppressive darkness that has been accumulating here for years. The attendant takes you gently by the hand and leads you carefully to a seat, a round seat without arms, that is waiting for you. In front of you are two bright eyes that look at you somewhat uncannily from a black screen, and under these eyes is a mouth, a hard rectangle softened by the dull light that fills it. Gradually you realize that you are set before a polygonal construction resembling a temple, and that the screen in front of which you are sitting is a part of it; you observe, too, that to right and left of you sits a worshipper who has applied his eyes to the eyes in the screen before him, and you do the same, after taking a look at the rectangle of light and noting that it says, “Government House in Calcutta.” But as soon as you peer into the open eye, Government House vanishes to the tinkle of a sweet bell and with a mechanical rattle; you can still see it sliding away while another view comes sliding after it, so that you feel almost cheated; but another bell tinkles, the view gives itself a little shake, as if to set itself off to the best advantage, and comes to rest. You see palm-trees and a well-kept path: in the background, where it is shaded, a man in a light suit is sitting on a seat; a fountain throws a congealed, whiplike jet of spray into the air, but you are not content until a glance at the softly lit rectangle informs you: “View in the Royal Park, Calcutta.” Then comes another tinkle, a sliding past of palms, seats, buildings, masts, a quiver into place, a tinkle of the bell, and in bright sunlight: “View of the Harbour, Bombay.” The man who has just been sitting on the seat in Calcutta Park is now standing in a sun-helmet on the hewn stones of the mole in the foreground. He is propped on a walking-stick and does not move, because he is spellbound by

the taut rigging of the ships, by their funnels and cranes, spellbound by the bundles of cotton bales on the quay, and gazes at them spellbound, and his face is in shadow and cannot be recognized. Yet perhaps he will advance into the magic space, enclosed in polished brown, that lies between you and the picture, a space that is but an abstract cube and yet a long journey; perhaps he will step out freely and magically upon the wooden floor, and you will recognize that it is Bertrand, airily and yet terribly warning you that he can never more be crossed out of your life, however far away he may be. But that may be only your imagination, for God has already rung the bell for him, and without a greeting, stiff and motionless, without taking even one step, he slides away again. You peep at your left-hand neighbour to see if that is where Bertrand has gone, but his lit rectangle reports: "Government House in Calcutta," and you can almost nurse the hope that Bertrand has appeared to you alone, to greet you only. But you have no time to reflect upon it, for when you turn quickly again to your own eyepieces a delightful surprise awaits you: the "Native Mother in Ceylon" is not only lit up by soft golden sunlight but represented in her natural colours; she smiles with white teeth between red lips and may be waiting for the white Sahib who has quitted the West because he despises European women. The "Temple Buildings in Delhi" also glow in all the colours of the Orient at the far end of the brown box: there the bad Christian may learn that even subject races know how to serve God. But did he not once say himself that it would devolve upon the black races to set up the Kingdom of Christ again? You look with horror at the swarm of brown figures, and are not ill-pleased to hear the signal with which they are dismissed, to give place to the "Elephant-hunting Expedition." Here stand the colossal quadrupeds, one of them gently lifting a forefoot. The square is full of fine white sand, and when you turn your dazzled eyes away for a moment you see above the rectangular title-plate a small button, which you twirl experimentally. At once, to your delight, the picture is suffused by soft moonlight, so that you can expedite the hunters at your pleasure by day or by night. Well, since the sun-glare no longer blinds you, you seize the opportunity of examining the hunters' faces, and if your eye does not deceive you it is Bertrand, after all, who is sitting in the howdah behind the dusky mahout, his rifle at the ready in his right hand, promising death. You change the light, and once more it is an utter stranger who smiles at you, and the mahout lays his goad behind the elephant's ear to give the signal for the prescribed start of the expedition; they slide away into the jungle, yet you hear nothing of the trampling of the herds and the trumpeting of the bulls, but with a faint tinkle and a mechanical rattle landscape after landscape advances of its own accord and vanishes, and if the passing traveller seems to be really the man you are bound to seek for ever, the man you hunger for, the man who vanishes while you are still holding his hand, then the bell tinkles, and before you know where you are you are peering anxiously at your neighbour's title-plate on the right, and discovering the inscription: "Government House in Calcutta," so that you know your hour will be over soon. Then you give a cursory look to make sure that the palms of the Royal Park are due to follow, and since they follow on ruthlessly you scrape your chair, the attendant hurries up, and blinking a little, your collar turned up, a poor creature found indulging a pleasure he has never realized, you leave with a brief salutation the room in which others are already waiting, and in which the old lady is selling books of tickets.

Into this establishment Joachim and Elisabeth strayed, accompanied by Elisabeth's companion, when they were making purchases in the city for their house and the trousseau. For although they knew that Bertrand was still in Hamburg, and although they never mentioned his name again, the word India had a magic sound for them.

The wedding at Lestow was a quiet one. The condition of Joachim's father had become stationary; he lay in a coma, no longer recognizing the outer world, and one had to be reconciled to this lasting for years. True, the Baroness said that a quiet, intimate ceremony would be far more to the taste of herself and her husband than noisy display, but Joachim already knew the importance which his parents-in-law attached to their family festivals, and he felt to blame for his father, who robbed the occasion of its splendour. And he himself would perhaps have preferred a great and brilliant social setting to emphasise the social character of this marriage, into which mere love entered so little; yet on the other hand it seemed to him more in accordance with the gravity and Christian nature of the union that Elisabeth and he should approach the altar without any thought of the world. And so it was decided not to celebrate the marriage in Berlin, even although Lestow presented various difficulties not easy to overcome, more especially as Bertrand's advice was no longer to be had. Joachim rejected the idea of leading his bride home for the wedding night: the idea of passing that night in the house of sickness filled him with repugnance, but still more impossible to him was the thought that Elisabeth should retire to rest under the eyes of the domestic staff who knew him so well; so he suggested that Elisabeth should spend the night at Lestow, and he would fetch her next day. Strangely enough this proposal encountered the opposition of the Baroness, who found such a solution unseemly: "Even if we closed our eyes to it, what would the servants think?" Finally it was decided to hold

the ceremony at such an early hour that the young couple could catch the midday train. “Then you’ll be able to go straight to your own comfortable house in Berlin,” said the Baroness, but Joachim would not hear of that either. No, it was too far out, for they would be leaving Berlin again early in the morning, and probably they might even be able to take the night train to Munich without stopping. Yes, night travel was almost the simplest solution of the marriage problem, a safeguard against the fear that someone might smile understandingly when he and Elisabeth had to retire for the night. Yet presently he doubted whether they really could set out for Munich straight off; after the excitement of the day could one really expect Elisabeth to undertake a night journey? And how could their day in Munich, in perpetual expectation of what was to come, be put in? It was clear that one could not have discussed such matters even with Bertrand, one had to come to a decision oneself; all the same, several things would have been appreciably simpler if Bertrand had been at hand. He considered what Bertrand would have done in such circumstances, and came to the conclusion that there was no harm in his booking rooms in the Hotel Royal in Berlin; if Elisabeth should wish it, they could still take the night train. And he was honestly proud of having found this adroit solution by himself.

It had now become quite wintry, and the closed carriages in which they drove to the church advanced only by slow stages through the snow. Joachim was in the same carriage as his mother; she sat there, broad and complacent, and Joachim felt irritated when she reiterated: “Father would have been delighted; well, it’s a great pity.” Yes, that was all that was needed to fill his cup; Joachim was exasperated—nobody would leave him in peace to gain that calm which was imperative at this solemn hour, doubly imperative for him to whom this marriage signified more than a Christian marriage, to whom it meant redemption from the pit and the mire and a heavenly assurance that he was entering the way of grace. In her wedding-robe Elisabeth looked more like a Madonna than ever, looked like Snow-white, and he could not help thinking of the legend of the bride who had fallen down dead before the altar because she suddenly recognized in her bridegroom an incarnation of the Devil. The thought would not leave him and took such complete possession of him that he heard neither the chant of the choir nor the pastor’s sermon: indeed he actually closed his ears to them out of a fear that he might be compelled to interrupt them and tell those people that a man unworthy, an outcast, stood before the altar, a man who desecrated the holy state of matrimony; and he started in terror when he had to pronounce the “Yes,” in terror too at the thought that the ceremony, which should have been for him the revelation of a new life, had come to an end so quickly and almost without his being aware of it. He found it actually comforting that Elisabeth should now be called, without really being, his wife, but the thought that this state would not last was appalling. During the drive back from the church he took her hand and said: “My wife,” and Elisabeth responded to his pressure. But then everything was drowned in the tumult of good wishes, the hurry of changing and setting out, so that only when they reached the station did they realize what had happened.

He turned away while Elisabeth climbed into the compartment, so as not again to fall a prey to impure thoughts. Now they were alone. Elisabeth leant back wearily in her corner and smiled faintly at him. “You’re tired, Elisabeth,” he said hopefully, glad that it was his privilege and his duty to protect her. “Yes, I’m tired, Joachim.” He did not dare, however, to suggest that they should stop at Berlin, fearing that she might interpret it as concupiscence. Her profile stood out sharply against the window, beyond which stretched the grey winter afternoon, and Joachim felt relieved that that oppressive and affrighting vision in which her face changed into a landscape remained absent. But while he was still regarding her he saw that the trunk, which had been placed on the seat opposite, was outlined no less sharply against the grey sky, and he was overcome by the senselessly sharp fear that she might be a mere thing, a dead object, and not even a landscape. He got up hastily as though to do something to the trunk, but he merely opened it and took out the lunch-basket; it was a wedding present and a miniature miracle of elegance, suitable equally for train journeys and hunting expeditions: the ivory handles of the knives and forks were ornamented with decorative hunting scenes which were continued on the incised blades, and even the spirit-stove was not free from them; amid the ornamentation on each piece, however, one could recognize the intertwined arms of Elisabeth and Joachim. The centre space of the basket served as a receptacle for food and had been solicitously filled by the Baroness. Joachim pressed Elisabeth to eat, and as they had not been able to wait for the wedding lunch she gladly acceded. “Our first married meal,” said Joachim, and he poured the wine into the silver collapsible cups, and Elisabeth drank to him. In this way they passed the journey and Joachim was once more of the opinion that the train provided the best form of wedded life. He even began to understand Bertrand, who was at liberty to pass such a great part of his time in trains. “Shouldn’t we go straight through to Munich this evening?” he asked; but Elisabeth replied that she felt really fatigued and would rather break the journey. So he could not but divulge to her that he had already provided for her wish and booked rooms.

He was grateful to Elisabeth for the fact that she had not lost her composure, even if it was probably only

an assumed composure; for she lingered out the hour for retiring and asked for supper, and they sat for a very long time in the dining-hall; the band which played for the diners' entertainment had already put away their instruments, only a few guests were still left in the room, and grateful as any postponement of the hour was to Joachim, yet he felt again that cold, rarefied atmosphere diffusing itself through the room, that chill which on the evening of their betrothal had been like a dreadful foreboding of death. Perhaps even Elisabeth felt it, for she said that it was time now to retire.

So the moment had come. Elisabeth had parted from him with a friendly "Good-night, Joachim," and now he walked up and down his room. Should he simply go to bed? He regarded the bed, on which the sheets were folded down. Yet he had taken an oath to watch before her door, to guard her heavenly dreams, that for ever on her silvery cloud she might dream on; and now it had suddenly lost all sense and meaning, for everything seemed to point to the one conclusion, that he should make himself comfortable here. He glanced down at his clothes, and felt the long military coat as a protection; it was indecent for people to appear at weddings in frock-coats. All the same he must have a wash, and softly, as though he were committing an act of sacrilege, he pulled off his coat and poured water into the basin on the brown varnished washstand. How painful all this was, how senseless, unless it should be a link in the chain of trials laid on his shoulders; it would all have been easier if Elisabeth had locked the communicating door behind her, but out of consideration for him she had certainly not done that. Joachim vaguely remembered having been in the same position before, and now with crushing force came the memory of a locked door and a brown washstand under a gas-jet: dreadful because it was a memory of Ruzena, no less dreadful as raising the problem how, living with an angel, the thought of such a thing as a lavatory, no matter how discreetly it obtruded itself, was practically conceivable at all: in both cases a degradation of Elisabeth and a new trial. He had cleansed his face and hands gently and cautiously, so as to prevent the porcelain basin from making any sound against the marble top of the table, but now he was confronted with something quite inconceivable: for who could think of gargling in the immediate vicinity of Elisabeth? And yet he must immerse himself still more deeply in the purifying crystalline medium, must drown there, to walk forth from that utter purification as from baptism in Jordan. But how could even a bath help him here? Ruzena had recognized him for what he was and drawn the consequences. He slipped back hastily into his coat again, buttoned it up scrupulously, and walked up and down the room. There was no sound from the other room, and he felt that his presence must be an oppression to her. Why did she not scream at him to go away, as Ruzena had done behind the locked door? That time he had had the lavatory attendant at least to stand by him, but now he was alone and without support. All too prematurely he had rejected Bertrand and his easy assurance, and the fact that he had been capable of thinking it his duty to protect Elisabeth from Bertrand struck him now as hypocrisy. A terrible feeling of remorse came over him: it was not Elisabeth whom he had really wished to protect and save; he had merely hoped to save his own soul through her sacrifice. Was she kneeling on her knees in there praying that God might free her again from the fetters which she had assumed out of pity? Was it not his duty to say to her that he gave her her freedom, this very night, that if she commanded him he would drive her at once to her house in the west end, to her beautiful new house which was waiting for her? In great agitation he knocked at the communicating door and wished immediately that he had not done so. She said softly: "Joachim," and he turned the handle. She was lying in bed, a candle was burning on the commode. He remained at the door, almost as if he were standing at attention, and said hoarsely: "Elisabeth, I only wanted to tell you that I give you your freedom: I can't think of your sacrificing yourself for me." Elisabeth was astonished, but she felt relief that he did not accost her as a loving husband. "Do you think, Joachim, that I've sacrificed myself?" She smiled faintly. "Really you've thought of that a little too late." "It isn't too late yet; I thank God it isn't too late.… I didn't realize it until now.… Shall I drive you out to the west end?" Then Elisabeth could not help laughing: now, in the middle of the night! What would the people in the hotel think? "Why not just go to bed, Joachim. We can discuss all that in peace and quietness to-morrow. You must be tired too." Joachim said like an obstinate child: "I'm not tired." The flickering flame of the candle lighted up her pale face, which lay between her loosened hair on the snowy pillows. A peak of the bolster rose in the air like a nose, and its shadow on the wall was exactly the same shape as the shadow of Elisabeth's nose. "Please, Elisabeth, smooth down the corner of that pillow, to the left of your head there," he said from the door. "Why?" asked Elisabeth in surprise, putting up her hand towards it. "It casts such a horrible shadow," said Joachim; meanwhile another peak of the bolster had risen, showing another nose on the wall. Joachim was irritated, he wanted to set this matter right himself and took a step into the room. "But, Joachim, what's wrong with the shadows that they annoy you? Is it right now?" Joachim replied: "The shadow of your face on the wall is like a mountain range." "But that's nothing." "I can't stand it." Elisabeth was a little afraid lest this should be the prelude to putting out the candle, but to her pleasant surprise Joachim said: "We must have two candles for you, then there won't be any shadows and you'll look like Snow-white." And he

actually went into his room and came back with the second lighted candle. “Oh, you’re joking, Joachim,” Elisabeth could not help saying, “where are you to put the second candle? There’s no place for it on the wall. And besides, I would look like a corpse between two candles.” Joachim studied the position. Elisabeth was right, so he said: “May I set it on the commode?” “Of course you may …” she paused for a moment, and said hesitatingly and yet with a slight feeling of reassurance, “you’re my husband now.” He held his hand in front of the flame and carried the candle over to the commode, reflectively contemplated the two lights, and the quietness and semi-darkness of this wedding night striking him he said: “Three would be more cheerful,” as though with those words he were trying to excuse himself to Elisabeth and her parents for the quietness of the ceremony. She too gazed at the two candles; she had drawn the coverlet over her shoulders, and only her hand, caught at the wrist by a lace frill, hung languidly over the edge. Joachim was still thinking of the lack of display at their marriage; but he had held this hand in his in the carriage. He had become more composed, and had almost forgotten why he had come in here; now he remembered again and felt it his duty to repeat his offer: “So you don’t want to go to your house, Elisabeth?” “But you’re silly, Joachim; fancy my getting up now! I feel very comfortable here and you want to rout me out.” Joachim stood irresolutely beside the commode; suddenly he could not comprehend the way in which things changed their nature and vocation; a bed was a pleasant article of furniture for sleeping on, with Ruzena it was a coign of desire and inexpressible sweetness, and now it was a thing unapproachable, a something whose edge he scarcely dared to touch. Wood was wood and nothing more, but still one shrank from touching the wood of a coffin. “It’s so difficult, Elisabeth,” he said suddenly, “forgive me.” Yet he begged her forgiveness not merely, as she probably imagined, for expecting her to get up at that late hour, but because yet once more he had compared her with Ruzena, and—he admitted it to himself with horror—because he could almost have wished that Ruzena, and not she, were lying there. And he saw how deeply he was still stuck in the mire. “Forgive me,” he said again, and he knelt down so as to kiss a good-night on the white, blue-veined hand on the edge of the bed. She could not tell whether this might not mean the dreaded approach of intimacy, and remained silent. His mouth was pressed to her hand, and he became aware of his teeth, which were crushed against the inner side of his lips, as the frontier of the hard bony skull which was hidden beneath his own skull and was continued in the skeleton. He felt too the warm breath in the cavity of his mouth, and the tongue embedded in the trough between his lower teeth, and he knew that now he must quickly remove all these, so that Elisabeth might not become inwardly aware of them. Yet he would not concede Ruzena this quick triumph, and so in silence he remained stubbornly on his knees beside the bed, until Elisabeth, as though to indicate that he should go, very gently pressed his hand. Perhaps he intentionally misunderstood this hint, for it gave him a remote memory of Ruzena’s caressing hands; so he did not free Elisabeth’s hand, although he was actually very impatient to leave the room. He waited for the miracle, the token of grace which God must grant him, and it was as though fear stood between the gates of grace. “Elisabeth, say something,” he begged, and Elisabeth replied very slowly, as though the words were not her own: “We aren’t strange enough, and we aren’t intimate enough.” Joachim said: “Elisabeth, do you want to leave me?” Elisabeth answered gently: “No, Joachim, I think we’ll go the same road together now. Don’t be unhappy, Joachim, it will all turn out for the best yet.” Yes, Joachim would have liked to answer, and that’s what Bertrand said too; but he was silent, not merely because it would have been unseemly to suggest such a thing, but because in her mouth Bertrand’s words were like a Mephistophelian sign from the demon and the Evil One, instead of the sign from God that he had expected and hoped for and prayed for. For a moment Bertrand’s image was faintly visible as at the bottom of a brown box, visible and yet hidden, and it was the Devil incarnate whose face and form threw the shadow of a mountain range upon the wall. And immovable and frozen as it was when it appeared, and swiftly, as at the tinkling of a bell, as it vanished again, yet it was a warning that the Evil One was not yet overcome, and that Elisabeth herself was still in his power, seeing that with her own words she had called him up, and seeing that she had not succeeded in scaring away those phantoms and sick fancies with words from God. But even if this was disappointing, yet it was also good, filling him with a sense of the pathos of the earthly and the human and of human weakness. Elisabeth was his heavenly goal, but the way on earth to such a goal he had himself, in spite of his great weakness, to find out and prepare for both of them: and meanwhile where in this loneliness was a guide to be found to that knowledge? Where could he find help? Clausewitz’s aphorism came into his mind, that men act only from a divination and instinctive feeling of truth, and his heart was prescient with the knowledge that in a Christian household their lives would be determined by the saving help of grace, guarding them so that they might not wander on the earth unenlightened, helpless and without meaning to their lives, and lose themselves in the void. No, that could not be called a mere convention of feeling. He straightened himself and ran his hand softly over the silk coverlet under which her body lay; he felt a little like a sick-room attendant, and distantly it was as though he were stroking his sick father, or his father’s deputy. “Poor little Elisabeth,” he said; it was the first

endearment that he had ventured to utter. She had freed her hand, and now passed it over his hair: Ruzena had done that too, he thought. Nevertheless she said softly: “Joachim, we’re not intimate enough yet.” He had raised himself a little, and sat now on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair. Then with his head on his hand he contemplated her face, which still lay, pale and strange, not the face of a wife, not the face of his wife, on the pillow, and it so happened that gradually and without himself noticing it he found himself in a recumbent position beside her. She had moved a little to the side, and her hand, which with its befrilled wrist was all that emerged from the bedclothes, rested in his. Through his position his military coat had become disordered, the lapels falling apart left his black trousers visible, and when Joachim noticed this he hastily set things right again and covered the place. He had now drawn up his legs, and so as not to touch the sheets with his patent-leather shoes, he rested his feet in a rather constrained posture on the chair standing beside the bed. The candles flickered; first one went out, then the other. Now and then they heard muffled footsteps in the carpeted corridor, a door banged, and in the distance they could hear the sounds of the great city, whose gigantic traffic did not fully cease even at night. They lay motionless and gazed at the ceiling of the room, on which yellow strips of light from the slits of the window-blinds were pencilled, and they resembled a little the ribs of a skeleton. Then Joachim had fallen asleep, and when Elisabeth noticed it she could not help smiling. And then she too actually went to sleep.

IV

Nevertheless after some eighteen months they had their first child. It actually happened. How this came about cannot be told here. Besides, after the material for character construction already provided, the reader can imagine it for himself.

Part Two

THE ANARCHIST

(1903)

I

The 2nd of March 1903 was a bad day for August Esch, who was thirty years old and a clerk; he had had a row with his chief and found himself dismissed before he had time to think of giving notice. He was irritated, therefore, but less by the fact of his dismissal than by his own lack of resourcefulness. There were so many things that he could have flung in the man’s face: a man who didn’t know what was happening under his very nose, a man who believed the insinuations of a fellow like Nentwig and had no idea that the said Nentwig was pocketing commissions right and left—unless, indeed, he was shutting his eyes deliberately because Nentwig knew something shady about him. And what a fool Esch had been to let the pair of them catch him out like that: they had fallen foul of him over an alleged mistake in the books that wasn’t a mistake at all, now that he came to think of it. But they had bullied him so insolently that it had simply turned into a shouting match, in the middle of which he suddenly found himself dismissed. At the time, of course, he hadn’t been able to think of anything but guttersnipe abuse, whereas now he knew exactly how he could have scored. “Sir,” yes, “Sir,” he should have said, drawing himself up to his full height, and Esch now said “Sir” to himself in a sarcastic voice, “have you the slightest idea of the state your business is in …?” yes, that’s what he should have said, but now it was too late, and although he had gone and got drunk and slept with a girl he hadn’t got rid of his irritation, and Esch swore to himself as he walked along beside the Rhine towards the town.

He heard steps behind him and, turning, caught sight of Martin, who was swinging along between his crutches with the foot of his game leg braced against one of them. If that wasn’t the last straw! Esch would gladly have hurried on, at the risk of getting a wallop over the head from one of the crutches—serve him right too if he did get one over the head—but he felt it would be a low-down trick to play on a cripple, and so he stood waiting. Besides, he would have to look round for another job, and Martin, who knew everybody, might have heard of something. The cripple hobbled up, let his crooked leg swing free, and said bluntly: “Got the sack?” So he had heard of it already? Esch replied with bitterness: “Got the sack.” “Have you any money left?” Esch shrugged his shoulders: “Enough for a day or two.” Martin reflected: “I know of a job that might suit you.” “No, you won’t get me into your union.” “I know, I know; you’re too high and

mighty for that.… Well, you'll join some day. Where shall we go?" Esch was going nowhere in particular, so they proceeded to Mother Hentjen's. In the Kastellgasse Martin stopped: "Have they given you a decent reference?" "I'll have to call for it to-day." "The Central Rhine people in Mannheim need a shipping clerk, or something in that line … if you don't mind leaving Cologne," and they went in. It was a fairly large, dingy room that had been a resort of the Rhine sailors probably for hundreds of years; though except for the vaulted roof, blackened with smoke, no sign now indicated its antiquity. The walls behind the tables were wainscoted in brown wood half-way up, to which was fixed a long bench that ran round the room. Upon the mantelpiece was an array of Munich quart-jugs, among which stood an Eiffel Tower in bronze. It was embellished with a red-and-black-and-white flag, and when one looked more closely the words "Table reserved" could be deciphered on it in faded gold-lettering. Between the two windows stood an orchestrion with its folding-doors open, showing its internal works and the roll of music. Actually the doors should have remained closed, and anyone who wished to enjoy the music should have inserted a coin in the slot. But Mother Hentjen did nothing shabbily, and so the customer had merely to thrust his hand into the machinery and pull the lever; all Mother Hentjen's customers knew how to work the apparatus. Facing the orchestrion the whole of the shorter back wall was taken up by the buffet, and behind the buffet was a huge mirror flanked on either side by two glass cabinets containing brightly hued liqueur bottles. When in the evening Mother Hentjen took her post behind the buffet, she had a habit of turning round to the mirror every now and then to pat her blond coiffure, which was perched on her round, heavy skull like a hard little sugar-loaf. On the counter itself stood rows of large wine and Schnapps bottles, for the gay liqueur bottles in the cabinet were seldom called for. And finally, between the buffet and the glass cabinet, a zinc washing-basin with a tap was discreetly let into the wall.

The room was unheated, and its coldness stank. The two men chafed their hands, and while Esch sat down dully on a bench Martin put his hand into the works of the orchestrion, which blared out *The March of the Gladiators* into the cold atmosphere of the room. In spite of the din they could presently hear a wooden stair creaking under someone's footsteps, and the swing door beside the buffet was flung open by Frau Hentjen. She was still in her morning working-garb, an ample blue-cotton apron was tied over her dress, and she had not yet donned her evening corset, so that her breasts lay like two sacks in her broad-checked dimity blouse. Her hair, however, was still as stiff and correct as ever, crowning like a sugar-loaf her pale, expressionless face, which gave no indication of her age. But everybody knew that Frau Gertrud Hentjen had thirty-six years to her credit, and that for a long, long time—they had reckoned a little while ago that it must certainly be fourteen years—she had been the relict of Herr Hentjen, whose photograph, yellow with age, gazed out over the Eiffel Tower between the restaurant licence and a moonlit landscape, all three in fine black frames with gold scroll-work. And although with his little goat's beard Herr Hentjen looked like a snippet of a tailor, his widow had remained faithful to him; at least nobody could say anything against her, and whenever anyone dared to approach her with an honourable proposal she would remark with disdain: "Yes, the business would suit him to a T, no doubt. No, I'd rather carry on alone, thank you."

"Morning, Herr Geyring. Morning, Herr Esch," she said. "You're early birds to-day." "We've been long enough on our legs, though, Mother Hentjen," replied Martin, "if one works one must eat," and he ordered wine and bread and cheese; Esch, whose mouth and stomach were still wry with the wine he had drunk yesterday, took Schnapps. Frau Hentjen sat down with the men and asked after their news. Esch was monosyllabic, and although he was not in the least ashamed of his dismissal, it annoyed him that Geyring should publish the fact so openly. "Yes, another victim of capitalism," the trade-union organizer concluded, "but now I must get to work again; of course the Duke here can spread himself at his ease now." He paid and insisted on settling for Esch's Schnapps at the same time—"One must support the unemployed"—grasped his crutches, which he had propped beside him, braced his left foot against the wood, and swung himself out through the door between his two supports with a great clatter.

After he had gone the two of them remained silent for a little; then Esch jerked his chin towards the door: "An anarchist," he said. Frau Hentjen shrugged her plump shoulders: "And what if he is? He's a decent man." "He's a decent man, right enough," Esch corroborated, and Frau Hentjen went on: "but they'll lay him by the heels again sooner or later: he's done time for six months already …" then: "Well, it's all in his day's work." Once more they became silent. Esch was wondering whether Martin had been a cripple since his childhood; misbegotten, he thought to himself, and said: "He would like to land me among his socialist friends. But I'm not having any." "Why not?" asked Frau Hentjen without interest. "It doesn't suit my plans. I want to get to the top of the tree; law and order are necessary if you want to get to the top." Frau Hentjen could not but agree with that: "Yes, that's true, you must have law and order. But now I must go to the kitchen. Will you be having dinner with us to-day, Herr Esch?" Esch might as well dine here as anywhere else, and after all why should he wander about in the icy wind? "Strange that the snow hasn't come yet," he

said, “the dust fairly blinds you.” “Yes, it’s dismal outside,” said Frau Hentjen. “Then you’ll just stay here?” She disappeared into the kitchen, the swing door vibrated for a little longer, and Esch dully followed its vibrations until it finally came to rest. Then he tried to sleep. But now the coldness of the room began to strike into him; he walked up and down with a heavy and rather unsteady tread and took up the newspaper that lay on the buffet; but he could not turn the pages with his stiff fingers; his eyes too were painful. So he resolved to seek out the warm kitchen; with the newspaper in his hand he walked in. “I suppose you’ve come to have a sniff at the saucepans?” said Frau Hentjen, suddenly remembering that it was cold in the eating-room, and as it was her custom not to put on a fire there until the afternoon she suffered him to bear her company. Esch watched her bustling about the hearth and had a longing to seize her beneath the breasts, but her reputation for inaccessibility checked his desire at once. When the kitchenmaid who helped Frau Hentjen with her work went out he said: “I can’t understand your liking to live alone.” “Aha!” she replied, “you’re beginning that song too, are you?” “No,” said Esch, “it isn’t that. I was just wondering.” Frau Hentjen’s face had taken on a strangely frozen expression; it was as though she were disgusted at some thought, for she shook herself so violently that her breasts quivered, and then went about her work with the bored and empty face with which she always confronted her customers. Esch, sitting at the window, read his newspaper and afterwards looked out into the yard, where the wind was raising little cyclones of dust.

Later the two girls who acted as waitresses in the evening arrived, unwashed and unslept. Frau Hentjen, the two waitresses and the little kitchenmaid and Esch took their places round the kitchen table, stuck out their elbows, hunched themselves over their plates, and ate their dinner.

Esch had drawn up his application for the Mannheim post; he now needed only the reference to enclose with it. Actually he was glad that things had turned out as they had. It wasn’t good for a man to vegetate all the time in one place. He felt he must get out of Cologne, and the farther the better. A fellow must keep his eyes open; as a matter of fact he had always done that.

In the afternoon he went to the office of Sternberg & Company, wholesale wine merchants, to get his reference. Nentwig kept him waiting at the counter, and sat at his desk, fat and slouching, totting up columns. Esch tapped impatiently with his strong finger-nails on the counter. Nentwig got up: “Patience, patience, Herr Esch,” and he stepped to the barrier and said condescendingly: “Oh, about your reference?—that can’t be so very urgent. Well? Date of birth? Date of employment here?” With his head averted Esch supplied this information and Nentwig took it down. Then Nentwig dictated to the stenographer and brought the reference. Esch read it through. “That isn’t a reference,” he said, handing the paper back. “Oh! Then what is it?” “You must certify to my ability as a book-keeper.” “You—a book-keeper! You’ve shown us what you can do in that line.” Now the moment of reckoning had come: “It’s a very special kind of book-keeper that’s needed for the inventories you draw up, I happen to know.” Nentwig was taken aback: “What do you mean?” “I mean what I say.” Nentwig changed his tune, became friendly: “You only harm yourself with your obstreperousness; here you had a good post, and you had to get into a row with the chief!” Esch tasted victory and began to roll it on his tongue: “I mean to have a talk with the chief later.” “For all I care you can say what you like to the chief,” Nentwig countered. “Well, what do you want me to put in your reference?” Esch decreed that he should be described as “conscientious, reliable and thoroughly versed in all matters relating to book-keeping.” Nentwig wanted to be rid of him. “It isn’t true, of course, but as far as I’m concerned—” He turned again to the stenographer to dictate the new version. Esch grew red in the face: “Oh, so it isn’t true? … then please add: ’We heartily recommend him to any employer who may be in need of his services.’ Have you got that?” Nentwig bowed elaborately: “Delighted, I’m sure, Herr Esch.” Esch read the new copy through and was appeased. “The chief’s signature,” he commanded. But this was too much for Nentwig, who shouted: “So mine isn’t good enough for you?” “If the firm authorizes you I’ll let that pass,” was Esch’s large and magnanimous reply, and Nentwig signed.

Esch stepped out into the street and made for the nearest pillar-box. He whistled to himself; he felt rehabilitated. He had his reference, good; it was in the envelope with his application to the Central Rhine Company. The fact that Nentwig had given in showed that he had a bad conscience. So the inventories were faked then, and the man should be handed over to the police. Yes, it was simply one’s duty as a citizen to give him in charge straight away. The letter dropped into the post-box with a soft, muffled thud, and Esch, his fingers still in the aperture, considered whether he should go at once to the police headquarters. He wandered on irresolutely. It had been a mistake to send off the reference, he should have given it back to Nentwig; to force a reference out of a man and then give him in charge wasn’t decent. But now it was done, and besides, without a reference he had little chance of getting a post with the Central Rhine Shipping Company—there would be absolutely nothing left for him but to go back to his old job in Sternberg’s again. And he saw a vision of the chief discovering the fraud, and Nentwig languishing in prison. Yes, but what if the chief himself was involved in the swindle? Then of course the public interrogation would bring the

whole concern toppling down. And then there would be another bankruptcy, but no post for a book-keeper. And in the newspapers people would read: “Revenge of a dismissed clerk.” And finally he would be suspected of collusion. And then he would be left without a reference and without a job, for nobody would take him on. Esch congratulated himself on the shrewdness with which he drew all the consequences, but he was furious. “A fine bloody firm!” he swore under his breath. He stood in the Ring in front of the Opera House, cursing and swearing into the cold wind which blew the dust into his eyes, and could not come to any decision, but finally resolved to postpone the affair; if he didn’t get the post with the Central Rhine there would still be time left to act the part of Nemesis. He went through the darkening evening, his hands buried in the pockets of his shabby overcoat, actually went, indeed, as a matter of form, as far as the police headquarters. There he stood looking at the policemen on guard, and when a police wagon drove up he waited until all the prisoners had got out, and felt disappointed when the policeman finally slammed to the door without Nentwig’s having put in an appearance. He remained standing for a few moments, then he turned resolutely and made for the Alt Markt. The two faint vertical lines on his cheeks had deepened. “Wine faker,” he muttered in a fury, “vinegar tout.” And morose and disillusioned over his poisoned victory, he ended the day by getting drunk again and sleeping with another girl.

In her brown-silk dress, which she was accustomed usually to don only in the evening, Frau Hentjen had been spending the afternoon with a woman friend, and now, as always on her return, she was put into a bad temper by the sight of the house and the restaurant in which for so long she had been compelled to pass her life. Certainly the business allowed her to lay by a little now and then, and when she was praised and flattered by her women friends for her capability she experienced a faintly pleasant sensation which made up for a good deal. But why wasn’t she the owner of a linen-draper’s shop, or a ladies’ hairdressing saloon, instead of having to deal every evening with a pack of drunken louts? If her corset had not prevented her she would have shaken herself with loathing when she caught sight of her restaurant; so intensely did she hate the men who frequented it, these men that she had to serve. Though perhaps she hated still more the women who were always such fools as to run after them. Not a single one of her women friends belonged to the kind that took up with men, that trafficked with these creatures and like animals lusted for their embraces. Yesterday she had caught the kitchenmaid in the yard with a young lad, and the hand which had dealt the buffet still tingled pleasantly; she felt she would like to have it out with the girl again. No, women were probably still worse than men. She could put up only with her waitresses and all the other prostitutes who despised men even though they had to go to bed with them; she liked to talk to these women, she encouraged them to tell her their stories in detail, and comforted and pampered them to indemnify them for their sufferings. And so a post in Mother Hentjen’s restaurant was highly prized, and her girls looked upon it as well worth the best they could give in return and did all they could to retain it. And Mother Hentjen was delighted with such devotion and love.

Her best room was up on the first floor; really too big, with its three windows on the narrow street it took up the full breadth of the house above the restaurant; in the back wall, corresponding to the buffet downstairs, there was an alcove shut off by a light curtain which was always drawn. If one drew aside the curtain and let one’s eyes get used to the darkness, one could make out the twin marriage-beds. But Frau Hentjen never used this room, and nobody knew whether it had ever been used. For a room of such a size was difficult to heat except at a considerable cost, and so Frau Hentjen could not be blamed for choosing the smaller room above the kitchen as her bed- and sitting-room, employing the chill and gloomy parlour only for storing food that might go bad. Also the walnuts which she was accustomed to buy in autumn were stored here and lay strewn in heaps about the floor, upon which two broad green strips of linoleum were laid crosswise.

Still feeling angry, Frau Hentjen went up to the parlour to fetch sausage for her customers’ suppers, and as anger makes one careless she stumbled into some of the nuts, which rolled before her feet with an exasperatingly loud clatter. It exasperated her still more when one cracked beneath her foot, and while she picked up the nut so that it might not be altogether wasted, and carefully detached the kernel from the splintered pieces of shell, and stuck the white fragments with the bitter pale-brown skin into her mouth, she kept meanwhile screaming for the kitchenmaid; at last the brazen trollop heard her, came stumbling up the stairs, and was received with a torrent of incoherent abuse: of course a girl that flirted with half-grown louts would be stealing nuts too—the nuts had been stored beside the window and now they were just inside the door, and nuts didn’t walk across a floor of their own accord—and Frau Hentjen was preparing to raise her fist, and the girl had ducked and put up her arm, when a piece of shell caught in her mistress’s teeth, who contented herself with spitting it out contemptuously; then, followed by the sobbing maid, she descended to the kitchen.

When she entered the restaurant, where already a thick cloud of tobacco smoke was hanging, she was

overcome again, as almost every evening, by that apprehensive torpor which was so incomprehensible to her and yet so difficult to overcome. She went up to the mirror and mechanically patted the blond sugar-loaf on her head and pulled her dress straight, and only when she had assured herself that her appearance was satisfactory did her composure return. Now she looked round and saw the familiar faces among her customers, and although there was more profit on the drinks than on the food, she prized the eaters among her customers above the drinkers, and she stepped out from behind the buffet and went from table to table asking whether the food was to their liking. And she summoned the waitress almost with elation when a customer demanded a second helping. Yes, Mother Hentjen's cooking had no need to fear examination.

Geyring was already there; his crutches were leaning beside him; he had cut the meat on his plate into small pieces and now ate mechanically while in his left hand he held one of his Socialist papers, a whole bundle of which were always sticking out of his pocket. Frau Hentjen liked him, partly because, being a cripple, he did not count as a man, partly because it was not to shout and drink and make up to the waitresses that he came, but simply because his post demanded that he should keep in touch with the sailors and dock workers; but above all she liked him because evening after evening he had his supper at her restaurant and praised up her food. She sat down at his table. "Has Esch been here yet?" asked Geyring. "He's got the job with the Central Rhine, starts work on Monday." "And it's you that got it for him, I'm sure, Herr Geyring," said Frau Hentjen. "No, Mother Hentjen, we haven't got the length yet of filling posts through the union … no, not by a long way … well, that'll come too in time. But I put Esch on the track of it. Why shouldn't one help a nice lad, even if he isn't one of ourselves?" Mother Hentjen showed little sympathy with this sentiment: "You just eat that up, Herr Geyring, and you'll have an extra titbit from myself as well," and she went over to the buffet and brought on a plate a moderate-sized slice of sausage which she had garnished with a sprig of parsley. Geyring's wrinkled face of a boy of fourteen smiled at her in gratitude, showing a mouthful of bad teeth, and he patted her white, plump hand, which she immediately drew back with a slight return of her frozen manner.

Later Esch arrived. Geyring looked up from his paper and said: "Congratulations, August." "Thanks," said Esch. "So you know already?—there was no difficulty, a reply by return engaging me. Well, I must thank you for putting me on to it." But his face beneath the short, dark, cropped hair had the wooden empty look of a disappointed man. "A pleasure," said Martin, then he shouted over to the buffet: "Here's our new paymaster." "Good luck, Herr Esch," replied Frau Hentjen dryly, yet she came forward after all and gave him her hand. Esch, who wished to show that all the credit was not due to Martin, pulled his reference out of his breast-pocket: "It wouldn't have gone so smoothly, I can tell you, if I hadn't made Sternberg's give me such a good reference." He heavily emphasized the "made," and then added: "A measly firm." Frau Hentjen read the reference absently: "A splendid reference." Geyring too read it and nodded: "Yes, the Central Rhine must be glad they've got hold of such a first-class fellow.… I'll really have to get the Chairman, Bertrand, to fork out a commission for my services."

"An excellent book-keeper, excellent, what?" Esch preened himself. "Well, it's nice when anyone can have such things said about him," Frau Hentjen agreed. "You may feel very proud of yourself, Herr Esch; you've every right to: do you want anything to eat?" Of course he did, and while Frau Hentjen looked on complacently to see that he enjoyed his food, he said that now he was going farther up the Rhine he hoped to get one of the travelling jobs; that would mean going as far as Kehl and Basel. Meanwhile several of his other acquaintances had come up, the new paymaster ordered wine for them all, and Frau Hentjen withdrew. With disgust she noticed that every time Hede, the waitress, passed the table, Esch could not help fondling her, and that finally he ordered her to sit down beside him, so that they might drink to each other. But the score was a high one, and when the gentlemen broke up after midnight, taking Hede with them, Frau Hentjen pushed a mark into her hand.

Nevertheless Esch could not feel elated over his new post. It was as though he had purchased it at the cost of his soul's welfare, or at least of his decency. Now that things had gone so far and he had already drawn an advance for his travelling expenses from the Cologne branch of the Central Rhine, he was overcome anew by the doubt whether he shouldn't give Nentwig in charge. Of course in that case he would have to be present at the official inquiry, could not therefore leave the town, and would almost certainly lose his new job. For a moment he thought of solving the problem by writing an anonymous letter to the police, but he rejected this plan: one couldn't wipe out one piece of rascality by committing another. And on top of it all he was beginning to resent his own twinges of conscience; after all he wasn't a child, he didn't give a damn for the parsons and their morality; he had read all sorts of books, and when Geyring had recently begged him yet again to join the Social Democratic Party he had replied: "No, I won't have anything to do with you anarchists, but I'll go with you this far: I'll turn Freethinker." The thankless fool had replied that that didn't matter a damn to him. That was what people were like: well, Esch wouldn't give

a damn either.

Finally he did the most reasonable thing: he set off for Mannheim at the appointed time. But he felt violently uprooted, he had none of his accustomed pleasure in travelling, and as a safeguard he left part of his belongings in Cologne: he even left his bicycle behind. Nevertheless his travelling allowance put him in a generous mood. And standing with his beer-glass in his hand and his ticket stuck in his hat on Mainz platform, he thought of the people whom he had left, felt he wanted to show them a kindness, and, a newspaper man happening to push his barrow past at that moment, he bought two picture postcards. Martin in particular deserved a line from him; yet one did not send picture postcards to a man. So first he scribbled one to Hede: the second was destined for Frau Hentjen. Then he reflected that it might seem insulting to Frau Hentjen, who was a proud woman, to receive a postcard by the same post as one of her employees, and as he was in a reckless mood he tore up the first one and posted only the one to Frau Hentjen, containing his warmest greetings to her and all his kind friends and acquaintances and Fräulein Hede and Fräulein Thusnelda from the beautiful town of Mainz. After that he felt again a little lonely, drank a second glass of beer, and let the train carry him on to Mannheim.

He had been instructed to report to the head office. The Central Rhine Shipping Company Limited occupied a building of its own not far from the Mühlau Dock, a massive stone edifice with pillars in front of the door. The street in which it stood was asphalted, good for cycling; it was a new street. The heavy door of wrought-iron and glass—it would certainly swing smoothly and noiselessly on its hinges—stood ajar, and Esch entered. The marble vestibule pleased him; over the stair hung a glass sign-plate on whose transparent surface he read the words: “Board Room” in gold letters. He made straight for it. When his foot was on the first stair he heard a voice behind him: “Where are you going, please?” He turned round and saw a commissionaire in grey livery; silver buttons glittered on it and the cap had a strip of silver braid. It was all very elegant, but Esch felt annoyed—what business was it of this fellow’s?—and he said curtly: “I was asked to report here,” and made to go on. The other did not weaken: “To see the Chairman?” “Why, who else, do you think?” replied Esch rudely. The stair led up to a large, gloomy waiting-room on the first floor. In the middle of it stood a great oaken table, round which were ranged a few upholstered chairs. It was certainly very splendid. Once more a man with silver buttons appeared and asked what he wanted. “The Chairman’s office,” said Esch. “The gentlemen are at a board meeting,” said the attendant. “Is it important?” Driven to the wall, Esch had to tell his business; he drew out his papers, the letter engaging him, the receipt for his travelling allowance. “I’ve some references with me too,” he said, and made to hand over Nentwig’s reference. He was somewhat taken aback when the fellow did not even look at it: “You’ve no business with this up here … ground floor, through the corridor, then the second stair—inquire down below.”

Esch remained standing where he was for a moment; he grudged the attendant his triumph and asked once more: “So this isn’t the place?” The attendant had already turned away indifferently: “No, this is the Chairman’s waiting-room.” Esch felt anger rising up in him; they made too much of a blow with their Chairman, their upholstered furnishings and their silver-buttoned attendants; Nentwig too would no doubt like to play this game; well, their fine Chairman was probably not so very different from Nentwig. But, willy-nilly, Esch had to go back the same road again. Down below the commissionaire was still at his post. Esch looked at him to see whether he was angry; but as the commissionaire merely gazed at him indifferently he said: “I want the engagement bureau,” and asked to be shown the way. After taking a couple of steps he turned round, jerked his thumb towards the staircase, and asked: “What’s the name of your boss up there, the Chairman?” “Herr von Bertrand,” said the commissionaire, and there was almost a respectful ring in his voice. And Esch repeated, also somewhat respectfully: “Herr von Bertrand”: he must have heard the name at some time or other.

In the engagement bureau he learned that he was to be employed as stores clerk in the docks. As he stepped out into the street again a carriage halted before the building. It was a cold day; the powdery snow, drifted by the wind, lay on the kerb and against the corners of the wall; the horse kept striking a hoof against the smooth asphalt. It was obviously impatient and with reason. “A carriage, no less, for the Chairman,” Esch said to himself, “but as for us, we have to walk.” Yet all the same he liked all this elegance, and he was glad that he belonged to it. After all, it was one in the eye for Nentwig.

In the warehouse of the Central Rhine Shipping Company the office was a glass-partitioned box at the end of a long line of sheds. His desk stood beside that of the customs officer, and at the back glowed a little iron stove. When one was bored with one’s work, or felt lonely and forsaken, one could always watch the trucks being loaded and unloaded. The sailings were to begin in a few days, and on all the boats there was a great bustle. There were cranes which revolved and lowered their hooks as though to pick something or other cautiously out of the ships’ entrails, and there were others which projected over the water like bridges that had been begun but never completed. Of course these sights were not new to Esch, for he had seen exactly the same in Cologne, but there he had been so used to the long row of storage sheds that he had

never thought of them, and if he had forced himself to consider them, the buildings, the cranes and the landing-stages would have appeared almost meaningless, put there to serve human needs that were inexplicable. But now that he himself was concerned in these things they had grown into natural and purposive structures, and this gladdened him. While formerly he had at the most been surprised, occasionally indeed even irritated, that there should be so many export firms, and that the sheds, all alike, on the quays, should bear so many separate names, now the different businesses took on an individuality which one could recognize from the appearance of their stout or lean storekeepers, their gruff or pleasant stevedores. Also the insignia of His Majesty the Emperor of Germany's customs officers at the gates of the closed dock quarter flattered him: they made him vaguely conscious that here one lived and moved on foreign soil. It was both a constricted and a free life that one led in this sanctuary where wares could lie untaxed; it was frontier air that one breathed behind the iron gratings of the customs barriers. And even although he had no uniform to wear, and was, so to speak, only a private official, yet by virtue of his association with these customs and railway officials Esch had himself become almost an official figure, particularly as he carried in his pocket an official pass allowing him to wander at liberty through this exclusive province, and was already greeted with a welcoming salute by the watchman at the main gate. When he returned that salute he threw his cigarette away with a lordly sweep in obedience to the prohibition against smoking that was stuck up everywhere, and proceeded with long and important strides —a strict non-smoker himself, ready at any moment to come down upon any too familiar civilian for an infringement of the rule—to the office, where the storekeeper had already laid his list upon the desk. Then he drew on his grey-woollen mittens that left the finger-tips free, for without them his hands would have frozen in the musty coldness of the shed, looked over the lists, and checked the piled-up packing-cases and bales. Should a packing-case be in the wrong place he did not fail to throw the storekeeper, whose province it was to supervise the deliveries, a severe or at least an impatient look, so that he might give the docker responsible for it a proper talking-to. And when later the customs officer in his round stepped into the glass partition and said how warm it was in here, unfastening the collar of his tunic and pleasantly yawning in his chair, by that time the lists were checked and the contents copied into the books, and there was no difficulty about the rest; the two men sat at the table and lazily went over the papers. Then the customs officer, rapidly as ever, endorsed the lists with his blue pencil, took up the duplicates and locked them in his desk, and if there was nothing more to be done they proceeded together to the canteen.

Yes, Esch had made a good exchange, even if justice had suffered in the process. Still, he could not help wondering—and it was the only thing that disturbed his contentment—whether there mightn't be some way after all of duly giving Nentwig in charge; for only then would everything be in order.

Customs Inspector Balthasar Korn came from a very matter-of-fact part of Germany. He was born on the frontier-line between Bavaria and Saxony, and had received his earliest impressions from the hilly town of Hof. His mind was divided between a matter-of-fact desire for coarse amusements and a matter-of-fact parsimony, and after he had worked his way up to a sergeant's rank in active military service, he had seized the opportunity offered by a paternal Government to its faithful soldiers, and had obtained his transfer to the customs. A bachelor, he lived in Mannheim with his sister Erna, also unmarried, and as the empty best bedroom in his house was a standing offence in his eyes, he prevailed upon August Esch to give up his expensive room in the hotel and accept cheaper lodgings with him. And although he did not entirely approve of Esch, seeing that Esch as a Luxemburger could not boast of military service, yet he would not have been displeased to find in Esch a husband for his sister as well as an occupant for the spare bedroom; he was not sparing in unequivocal hints, and his sister, who was no longer young, accompanied them with bashful and tittering signs of protest. Indeed he actually went so far as to jeopardize his sister's good name, for he did not scruple to address Esch before the others in the canteen as "Herr Brother-in-Law," so that everybody must think that his friend already shared his sister's bed. Yet Korn did this not exclusively for the sake of having his joke; rather his intention was to compel Esch, partly by constantly accustoming him to the idea, partly through the pressure of public opinion, to transform into solid actuality the fictitious part which he was thus called on to play.

Esch had not been unwilling to move into Korn's house. Though he had knocked about so much he felt lonely. Perhaps the numbered streets of Mannheim were to blame, perhaps he missed the smells of Mother Hentjen's restaurant, perhaps it was that scoundrel Nentwig that still troubled him; at any rate he felt lonely and stayed on with the brother and sister, stayed on although he was quick to observe how the wind blew, stayed on although he had no intention of having anything to do with that elderly virgin; he was not impressed in the least by the great display of lingerie which Erna had gathered together in the course of the years, and which she showed him with considerable pride, nor did even the savings-bank book which she once let him see, showing a balance of over two thousand marks, attract him. But Korn's efforts to lure him

into the trap were so amusing that they were worth taking some risk for; of course one had to be wary and not let oneself be caught. As for example: Korn would rarely let him pay for their drinks when they forgathered in the canteen before they went home together; and after they had heartily cursed the quality of the Mannheim beer Korn was not to be dissuaded from turning in for Munich beer at the Spatenbräu cellar. Then, if Herr Esch hastily put his hand into his pocket, Korn would again refuse to let him pay: "You'll have your revenge yet, Herr Brother-in-law." But when they were sauntering down Rheinstrasse the customs inspector would punctually halt before certain of the lighted shop-windows and clap Esch on the shoulder with his great paw: "My sister has been wanting an umbrella like that for a long time: I'll have to buy it for her birthday," or: "Every house should have a gas-iron like that," or: "If my sister had a wringer she would be happy." And when Esch made no reply to all these hints Korn would become as furiously angry as he had once been at recruits who refused to understand how to handle their rifles, and the more silent Esch was as they walked on, the more furious grew his burly companion's rage at the impudently knowing expression on Esch's face.

But it was by no means parsimony that made Esch dumb on those occasions. For although he was thrifty and fond of picking up small gains, yet the thorough and righteous book-keeping which in his soul he believed in did not allow him to accept goods without payment; service demanded counter-service, and goods must be paid for; nevertheless he thought it unnecessary to have a purchase forced on him in too great a hurry; indeed it would have seemed to him almost clumsy and inconsiderate to crown Korn's breezy demands with actual success. So for the time being he had hit upon a curious kind of revenge which allowed him to repay his obligations to Korn and at the same time show that he was in no hurry to marry; after dinner he would invite Korn out for a little evening's entertainment which took them to those beer-shops where there were barmaids, and unavoidably ended for them both in the so-called disreputable streets of the town. It sometimes cost a good deal of money to foot the bill for both of them—even if Korn could not get out of tipping his girl himself—yet the sight of Korn on the way home afterwards, walking along morosely, chewing at his black, bushy moustache, which was now limp and dejected, growling that this loose life Esch was leading him into must be put an end to: that was well worth all the expense. And besides, Korn was always in such a bad temper with his sister next morning that he went out of his way to wound her in her tenderest feelings, accusing her of never having been able to catch a man. And when thereupon she maintained hotly that she had had hosts of admirers, he would remind her contemptuously of her single estate.

One day Esch managed to wipe off his debt to a considerable extent. While he was on his way through the company's stores his vigilant eye was caught by the curiously shaped packing-cases and properties of a theatrical outfit, which were just being unloaded. A clean-shaven gentleman was standing by in great agitation, shouting that his valuable property, which represented untold wealth, was being handled as roughly as if it were firewood, and when Esch, who had been looking on gravely with the air of a connoisseur, threw a few pieces of superfluous advice to the labourers, and in this unmistakable fashion gave the gentleman to know that he was in the presence of a man of knowledge and authority, the formidable volubility of the stranger was turned upon him and they soon found themselves engaged in a friendly conversation, in the course of which the clean-shaven gentleman, raising his hat slightly, introduced himself as Herr Gernerth, the new lessee of the Thalia Theatre, who would be particularly flattered—in the meanwhile the work of unloading had been completed—if the Shipping Inspector and his esteemed family would attend the opening performance, and begged to present him with the necessary tickets at reduced prices. And when Esch agreed with alacrity, the manager put his hand in his pocket and actually wrote out three free tickets for him on the spot.

Now Esch was sitting with the Korns in the variety theatre at a table covered with a white cloth. The programme opened with a novel attraction, the moving pictures or, as they were called, the cinematograph. These pictures, however, did not meet with much applause from the audience, or indeed from the public in general at that time, not being regarded as serious and genuine entertainment, but merely as a prelude to it; nevertheless this modern art-form really held one's attention when a comedy was put on showing the comic effects of laxative pills, the critical moments being emphasized with a ruffle of drums. Korn roared with mirth and brought down the flat of his hand on the table; Fräulein Korn put her hand over her mouth and giggled, throwing stolen coquettish glances at Esch through her fingers, and Esch was as proud as though he himself were the inventor and producer of this highly successful entertainment. The smoke from their cigars ascended and melted into the cloud of tobacco smoke which very soon floated under the low roof of the hall traversed by the silvery beam of the limelight which lit up the screen. During the interval, which came after an act imitating the whistling of birds, Esch ordered three glasses of beer, though it cost considerably more here in the theatre than anywhere else, but he was relieved when it proved to be flat and stale and

they decided to give no further orders, but to have a drink in the Spatenbräu after the performance. He felt once more in a generous mood, and while the prima donna was being passionate and despairing to the best of her ability he said significantly: “Ah, love, Fräulein Erna, love.” But when, after the vociferous applause which greeted the singer from all sides, the curtain rose again, the whole stage glittered as with silver, and little nickel-plated tables stood about, and all the other glittering apparatus of a juggler. On the red-velvet cloths with which the various stands were either hung or completely draped stood balls and flasks, little flags and banners, and also a great pile of white plates. On a ladder running up to a point—it too shone with nickel-plating—hung some two dozen daggers whose long blades glittered no less brilliantly than all the shining metal round them. The juggler in his black dress-suit was supported by a female assistant, whom he brought on, it was clear, simply to display her striking beauty to the public, and also the spangled tights she wore must have been designed merely to that end, for all that she had to do was to hand the juggler the plates and the flags, or to fling them to him in the midst of his performance whenever, as a signal, he clapped his hands. She discharged this task with a gracious smile, and when she threw him the hammer she emitted a short cry in some foreign tongue, perhaps to draw the attention of her master to her, perhaps also to beg for a little affection, which her austere tyrant, however, sternly denied her. And although he must certainly have known that he ran the risk of losing the audience’s sympathy by his hard-heartedness, he did not accord his beautiful helper even a single glance, and only when he had to acknowledge the applause with a bow did he indicate by a casual wave of his hand in her direction that he allowed her a certain percentage of it. But then he walked to the back of the stage, and quite amicably, as though the affront which he had just put upon her had never happened, they lifted up together a great black board which, noticed by nobody, had been waiting there all the time, brought it forward to the waiting array of shining paraphernalia, set it up on end, and fastened it securely to the ladder. Thereupon, mutually encouraging each other with short cries and smiles, they pushed the black board, now set up vertically, to the front of the stage, and secured it to the floor and the wings with cords which suddenly appeared from nowhere. After they had seen to this with profound solemnity, the beautiful assistant once more emitted her short cry and skipped over to the board, which was so high that, stretching her arms upwards, she could scarcely touch the top edge. And now one saw that two handles were fixed into the board near the top, and the assistant, who stood with her back against the board, seized hold of those handles, and this somewhat constrained and artificial posture gave her, as she stood sharply outlined in her glittering and flimsy attire against the black board, the look of someone being crucified. Yet all the same she still went on smiling her gracious smile, even when the man, after regarding her with sharp half-shut eyes, went up to her and altered her position, altered it so slightly as to be unnoticeable, it is true, yet in such a way that the spectators became aware that everything depended on that fraction of an inch. All this was done to the subdued strains of a waltz, which immediately broke off at a slight sign from the juggler. The theatre became quite still; an extraordinary isolation, divested even of music, lay on the stage up there, and the waiters did not dare to walk up to the tables with the beer and food they were carrying, but stood, themselves tense with excitement, by the yellow-lighted doors at the back; guests who were on the point of eating put back their forks, on which they had already spitted some morsel, on their plates, and only the limelight, which the operator had directed full on the crucified girl, went on whirring. But the juggler was already testing one of the long daggers in his murderous hand; he bent his body back and now it was he who sent out the discordant exotic cry, while the dagger flew whistling from his hand, whizzed straight across the stage, and quivered in the black wood with a dull impact beside the body of the crucified girl. And now, faster than one could follow him, he had both hands full of glittering daggers, and while his cries became more rapid and more brutal, indeed, veritably bestial, the daggers whizzed in more and more rapid succession through the quivering air, struck with ever more rapid impact on the wood, and framed the girl’s face, which still smiled, numb and yet confident, appealing and yet challenging, brave and yet apprehensive. Esch could almost have wished that it was himself who was standing up there with his arms raised to heaven, that it was himself being crucified, could almost have wished to station himself in front of that gentle girl and receive in his own breast the menacing blades; and had the juggler, as often happened, asked whether any gentleman in the audience would deign to step on to the stage and place himself against the black board, in sober truth Esch would have accepted the offer. Indeed the thought of standing up there alone and forsaken, where the long blades might pin one against the board like a beetle, filled him with almost voluptuous pleasure; butin that case, he thought, correcting himself, he would have to stand with his face to the board, for a beetle was never spitted from the under side: and the thought of standing with his face to the darkness of the board, not knowing when the deadly daggers might fly, transfixing his heart and pinning it to the board, had so extraordinary and mysterious a fascination for him, grew into a desire so novel, so powerful and satisfying, that he started as out of a dream of bliss when with a flourish of drums and fanfares the orchestra greeted the juggler, who had triumphantly dispatched the last of the daggers,

and the girl skipped out of her frame, which was now complete, and both of them with a graceful pirouette, holding hands and executing spacious gestures with their free arms, bowed to the audience, now released from its ordeal. It was the fanfare of the Last Judgment, when the guilty were to be trodden underfoot like worms; why shouldn't they be spitted like beetles? Why, instead of a sickle, shouldn't Death carry a long darning-needle, or at least a lance? One always lived in fear of being awakened to the Last Judgment, for even if one had once upon a time almost thought of joining the Freethinkers, yet one had a conscience. He heard Korn saying: "That was great," and it sounded like blasphemy: and when Fräulein Erna remarked that, if they asked her, she would take good care not to be set up there almost naked and have knives thrown at her before the whole audience, it was too much for Esch, and in the most ungentle manner he flung away her knee, which was leaning against his; one shouldn't take people like these to see a superior entertainment; interlopers without a conscience, that's what they were; and he was not in the least impressed by the fact that Fräulein Erna was always running to her confessor; indeed the life of his Cologne friends seemed to him by far more secure and respectable.

In the Spatenbräu Esch drank his dark beer in silence. He was still in the grip of an emotion that could only be called yearning. Especially when it took shape as a need to send a picture postcard to Mother Hentjen. It was of course only natural that Erna should add a line: "Kind regards from Erna Korn," but when Balthasar too insisted on contributing and beneath his, "Regards, Korn, Customs Inspector," scored in his firm hand a black definitively conclusive flourish, it was like a sort of homage to Frau Hentjen, and it softened Esch so much that he became unsure of himself: had he really quite fulfilled his obligation to give an honest return for the Korns' kindness? Actually, to round off the evening, he should steal across to Erna's door, and if he had not thrust her away so ungently just now the door would certainly have been left unbarred. Yes, properly regarded, that was the right and fitting conclusion to the evening, yet he did nothing to bring it about. A sort of paralysis had fallen on him; he paid no further attention to Erna, did not seek her knee with his, and nothing happened either on the way home or afterwards. For some reason or other his conscience was troubling him, but finally he decided in his mind that he had done enough after all, and that it might even lead to trouble if he showed too much attention to Fräulein Korn; he felt a fate hovering over his head with threateningly upraised lance ready to strike if he should go on behaving like a swine, and he felt that he must remain true to someone, even though he did not know who it was.

While Esch was still feeling the stab of conscience in his back so palpably that he declared he must have sat in a cold draught, and every night rubbed himself as far as he could reach with a pungent embrocation, Mother Hentjen was rejoicing over the two picture postcards which he had sent her, and stuck them, before they should go for final preservation into her picture-postcard album, in the mirror frame behind the buffet. Then in the evening she took them out and showed them to the regular customers. Perhaps she did this also lest anybody might say of her that she was carrying on a secret correspondence with a man; for if she let the postcards go the round of the restaurant then they were no longer directed merely to her, but to the establishment, which was only incidentally personified in her. For this reason too she was glad that Geyring undertook the task of replying; yet she would not hear of Herr Geyring going to any expense, so she herself procured next day a particularly beautiful panorama card, as it was called, three times the length of an ordinary postcard, showing the whole of Cologne stretching along the dark-blue banks of the Rhine, and leaving space for a great number of signatures. At the top she wrote: "Many thanks for the beautiful postcards from Mother Hentjen." Then Geyring gave the command: "Ladies first," and Hede and Thusnelda signed their names. And then followed the names of Wilhelm Lassmann, Bruno May, Hoelst, Wrobek, Hülsenschmitt, John, the English mechanic Andrew, the sailor Wingast, and finally, after several more, all of which were not decipherable, the name of Martin Geyring. Then Geyring wrote out the address: "Herr August Esch, Head Book-keeper, Shipping Depot, Central Rhine Shipping Company Limited, Mannheim," and handed the finished product to Frau Hentjen, who, after reading it through carefully, opened the cash drawer to take from the large wire basket in which the bank-notes lay the necessary postage stamp. To her now the enormous card, with the long list of signatures, seemed almost too marked an honour for Esch, who had not been after all among the best patrons of the restaurant. But as everything she did she liked to do thoroughly, and as on the huge card there still remained, in spite of all the names, enough empty space not only to offend her sense of proportion, but also to provide the desired chance of putting Esch in his place by filling it in with a name of more humble rank, Mother Hentjen bore the card to the kitchen for the maid to sign her name, doubly pleased that in this way she could give pleasure to the poor girl without its costing anything.

When she returned to the restaurant Martin was sitting at his usual place in the corner near the buffet, buried in one of the Socialist journals. Frau Hentjen sat down beside him and said jestingly, as she often did: "Herr Geyring, you'll get my restaurant a bad name yet if you use it all the time for reading your

seditious papers." "I'm disgusted enough myself with these scribblers," was the answer, "fellows like us do all the work, and these chaps only scribble a lot of nonsense." Once more Frau Hentjen felt a little disappointed in Geyring, for she had never given up the hope that he would yet come out with something revolutionary and full of hatred on which she might feed her own resentment against the world. She had often glanced into the Socialist papers, but really what she found there had seemed to her pretty tame, and so she hoped that Geyring's living speech would have more to give her than the printed word. So to a certain extent she was pleased that Geyring too did not think much of the newspaper writers, for she was always pleased when anyone did not think much of anyone else; yet, on the other hand, he still continued to disappoint her expectations. No, these anarchists didn't get you very far, there wasn't much help in a man like Geyring who sat in his trade-union bureau just like a police sergeant in his office, and Frau Hentjen was once more firmly convinced that the whole structure of society was simply a put-up job among the men, who laid their heads together to injure and disappoint women. She made one more attempt: "What is it that you don't like in your papers, Herr Geyring?" "They write such stuff," growled Martin, "turn the people's heads with their revolutionary rant, and then we've got to pay for it." Frau Hentjen did not quite understand this; besides, she was no longer interested. Mainly out of politeness she sighed: "Yes, life isn't easy." Geyring turned over a page and said absently: "No, life isn't easy, Mother Hentjen." "And a man like you, always on the go, always at it from early morning till late at night…." Geyring said almost with satisfaction: "There won't be any eight-hour day for men like me for a long time yet: everybody else will get it first…." "And to think that they try to make it harder for you!" said Frau Hentjen in amazement, shaking her head and throwing a glance at her coiffure in the mirror behind the buffet. "Yes, they can make a fine noise in the Reichstag and the newspaper, our friends the Jews," said Geyring, "but when it comes to the real work of organization they turn tail." Frau Hentjen could understand this: she agreed indignantly: "They're everywhere, these Jews; they have all the money and no woman is safe from them, they're just like bulls." The old expression of petrified loathing overspread her face. Martin looked up from his paper and could not help smiling: "It isn't as bad as all that, surely, Mother Hentjen." "So now you're sticking up for the Jews next?" there was a hint of hysterical aggressiveness in her voice, "but you always stick up for one another, you men," and then quite unexpectedly: "a girl in every port." "That may be, Mother Hentjen," laughed Martin, "but you won't find such good cooking as Mother Hentjen's anywhere in a hurry." Frau Hentjen was appeased: "Not even in Mannheim, maybe," she said, handing Geyring the picture postcard that he was to send off to Esch.

Gernerth, the theatre manager, now belonged to Esch's intimate circle of friends. For Esch, an impetuous man, had bought another ticket the very day after the first performance, not merely because he wanted to see that brave girl again, but also that he might look up a somewhat astonished Gernerth after the performance and introduce himself as a paying client; while doing this he once more thanked the manager for a lovely evening's enjoyment, and Gernerth, who saw a request for more free tickets in the offing, and was already preparing to refuse them, could not but feel touched. And heartened by his cordial reception Esch simply remained sitting; thus achieving his second object, for he was presented to the juggler Herr Teltscher and also to his brave companion Ilona, who, it turned out, were both of them of Hungarian birth, at least Ilona was, and she had very little command over German, while Herr Teltscher, whose professional name was Teltini, and who employed English on the stage, came from Pressburg.

Herr Gernerth, on the other hand, was an Egerlander, and this was a matter for great joy to Korn, the first time that the two men met; for the towns of Eger and Hof were close neighbours, and Korn could not but regard it as an extraordinary coincidence that two men who were almost landsmen should meet in Mannheim of all places. Still his expressions of joy and surprise were more or less rhetorical, for in less desirable circumstances the fact that he was meeting almost a landsman would have left him quite indifferent. He invited Gernerth to visit his sister and himself, partly perhaps because he could not bear the idea of his presumptive brother-in-law having private acquaintanceships of his own, and Herr Teltscher too was presently invited to a repast of coffee and cakes.

So now on a dull Sunday afternoon they all sat at the round table, on which beside the bulging coffee-pot the cakes, contributed by Esch, were piled up artistically in a pyramid, while outside the rain poured down the window-panes. Herr Gernerth began, trying to set the conversation going: "You've a very nice place here, Herr Customs Inspector, roomy, lots of light…." And he looked out through the window at the dreary suburban street, in which lay great puddles of rain. Fräulein Erna remarked that it was really too small for their circumstances, yet a fireside of one's own was the only thing that could make life sweet. Herr Gernerth became elegiac: no place like home, yes, she might well say that, but for an artist it was an unfulfillable dream; no, for him there could be no home; he had a flat, it was true, a pleasant and comfortable flat in Munich, where his wife lived with the children, but he was almost a stranger to his family by this time.

Why didn't he take them with him? It was no life for children, on tour all the time. And besides—No, his children would never be artists, *his* children wouldn't. He was obviously an affectionate father, and Esch as well as Fräulein Erna felt touched by his goodness of heart. And perhaps because he felt lonely Esch said: "I'm an orphan, I can scarcely remember my mother." "Poor fellow!" said Fräulein Erna. But Herr Teltscher, who did not seem to relish this lugubrious talk, now made a coffee-cup revolve on the tip of his finger so that they could not help laughing, all but Ilona who sat impassively on her chair, recuperating, it seemed, from the perpetual smiles with which she had to embellish her evenings. At close quarters she was by no means so lovely and fragile as she had been on the stage, but might even have been called plump; her face was slightly puffy, there were heavy pouches covered with freckles under her eyes, and Esch, now become mistrustful, began to suspect that her beautiful blond hair, too, might not be genuine, but only a wig; yet his suspicions faded whenever he looked at her body, for he could not help seeing the knives whizzing past it. Then he noticed that Korn's eyes too were caressing that body, and so he tried to attract Ilona's attention, asked her whether she liked Mannheim, whether she had seen the Rhine before, with similar geographical inquiries. Unfortunately his attempts were unsuccessful, for Ilona only replied now and then and at the wrong point: "Yes, very nice," and wished, it seemed, to have nothing to do either with him or with Korn; she drank her coffee heavily and seriously, and even when Teltscher spluttered something at her in their sibilant native idiom, obviously something disagreeable, she scarcely listened. Meanwhile Fräulein Erna was telling Gernerth that a happy family life was the most beautiful thing in the world, and she gave Esch a little nudge with her toe, either to encourage him to follow Gernerth's example, or perhaps merely to withdraw his attention from the Hungarian girl, whose beauty, however, she praised none the less; for the greedy longing with which her brother was regarding the girl had not escaped her vigilant glance, and she considered it preferable that the lovely charmer should fall to her brother rather than to Esch. So she stroked Ilona's hands and praised their whiteness, rolled up the girl's sleeve and said that she had a lovely fine skin, Balthasar should only look at it. Balthasar put out his hairy paw to feel it. Teltscher laughed and said that every Hungarian woman had a skin like silk, whereupon Erna, who also had a skin of her own, replied that it was all a matter of tending one's complexion, and that she washed her face every day in milk. Certainly, said Gernerth, she had a marvellous, indeed an international, complexion, and Fräulein Erna's withered face parted in a smile, showing her yellow teeth and the gap where one tooth was missing in her left upper jaw, and blushed to the roots of the hair at her temples, which hung down thin and brown and a little faded, from her coiffure.

Twilight had fallen; Korn's fist grasped Ilona's hand more and more firmly, and Fräulein Erna was waiting until Esch, or Gernerth at least, should do the same with hers. She hesitated to light the lamp, chiefly because Balthasar would have radically disapproved of the disturbance, but at last she was forced to get up so as to fetch the blue carafe of home-brewed liqueur which stood ostentatiously on the sideboard. Proudly announcing that the recipe was her own secret she served out the brew, which tasted like flat beer, but was applauded as delicious by Gernerth; in his admiration he even kissed her hand. Esch remembered that Mother Hentjen did not like Schnapps drinkers, and it filled him with particular satisfaction to think that she would have had all sorts of hard things to say of Korn, for he was tossing down one glass after another, smacking his lips each time, and sucking the drops from his dark, bushy moustache. Korn poured out a glass for Ilona too, and it may have been her imperturbable indifference and impassivity that made her allow him to lift the glass to her mouth and raise no objection even when he took a sip from it himself, dipping his moustache into it, and declaring that it was a kiss. Evidently Ilona did not understand what he had said, but on the other hand Teltscher must know what was happening. Incomprehensible that he should look on so calmly. Perhaps he was suffering inwardly, and was simply too well-bred to create a scene. Esch had a strong desire to do it for him, but then he remembered the rough tone in which Teltscher had ordered the brave girl to hand him things on the stage; perhaps he was deliberately trying to humiliate her? Something or other should be done, somebody ought to shield Ilona! But Teltscher merely clapped him jovially on the shoulder, calling him colleague and brother, and when Esch looked at him questioningly pointed to the two couples and said: "We must stick together, we young bachelors." "I'll have to take pity on you, I see," said Fräulein Erna, changing places so that she sat now between Gernerth and Esch, but Herr Gernerth said in an offended tone: "That's how we poor artists are always being slighted … for these commercial fellows." Teltscher declared that Esch shouldn't allow this, for it was only in the commercial class that solidity and breadth of vision were still to be found. The theatrical industry itself might even be regarded as a branch of commerce, and indeed as the most difficult of the lot with all respect to Herr Gernerth, who was not only his manager, but in a sense his partner, besides being in his own way a very capable man of business, even if he didn't exploit possible avenues of success as he might. He, Teltscher-Teltini, could see that very well, for before he felt drawn to an artist's life he had been in commerce himself. "And what's been the end of it all? Here I sit, when I might have lots of first-class engagements in America.… And I ask you, is my turn a

first-class one, or isn't it?" A vague memory rose up rebelliously in Esch; what reason had they to praise up the commercial classes so much? The precious solidity they talked of wasn't so solid as they thought. He said so frankly, and ended: "Of course there's a great difference, for instance, between Nentwig and von Bertrand, the Chairman of our company; they're both in commerce, but the one is a swine and the other … well, he's something different, something better." Korn growled contemptuously that Bertrand was a renegade officer, everybody knew that, he needn't give himself airs. Esch was not displeased to hear this; so the difference between them wasn't so very great after all! But that didn't alter matters; Bertrand was something better, and in any case these were speculations which he had no desire to pursue too far. Meanwhile Teltscher went on talking about America; over there one could soon come to the top, over there one didn't need to work oneself to skin and bone for nothing as one did here. And he quoted: "America, you lucky land." Gernerth sighed: yes, if he had only had enough of the commercial spirit things would be different now; he had been very rich once himself, but in spite of all his business acumen he had kept the childlike trustfulness of the artist and had been cheated out of all his capital, almost a million marks, by pure fraud. Yes, Herr Esch might well look at him, Gernerth had once been a rich man! *Tempi passati.* Well, he would make his pile again. He had the idea of a theatrical trust, a huge limited liability company for whose shares people would yet be falling over one another. One had simply to march with the times and get hold of capital. And once more kissing Fräulein Erna's hand he asked his glass to be filled again, and said with the air of a connoisseur: "Delicious," still clasping her hand, which remained willingly and contentedly surrendered to him. But Esch, overwhelmed by all that he had heard, and now sunk in thought, scarcely noticed that Fräulein Erna's shoe was pressing against his, and saw only as from a distance and in the darkness Korn's yellow hand which lay on Ilona's shoulder and made it easy to guess that Balthasar Korn had put his powerful arm round Ilona's neck.

But then finally the lamp had to be lit, and now the conversation became general, only Ilona remaining silent. And as it was time to leave for the theatre, and they did not want to break up, Gernerth invited his hosts to attend the performance. So they got ready and took a tram to the theatre. The two ladies went inside and the men smoked their cigars on the platform at the back. Cold drops of rain spattered now and then into their heated faces, refreshing them pleasantly.

The name of the tobacconist from whom August Esch usually bought his cheap cigars was Fritz Lohberg. He was a young man about the same age as Esch, and this may have been the reason why Esch, who was always in the company of people older than himself, treated him as if he were a fool. Nevertheless the fool must have had some slight importance for him, and really it should have given Esch himself matter for thought that just in this shop he should feel so much at home as to become a regular customer. True, the shop lay on the way to his work, yet that was no reason why he should feel at home in it so immediately. Certainly it was very spick-and-span, a pleasant place to dawdle in: the light, pure fragrance of tobacco that filled it gave one an agreeable titillation in the nose, and it was nice to run one's hand over the polished counter, at one end of which, beside the glittering nickel-plated automatic cash register, invariably stood several open sample boxes of light-brown cigars and a little stand containing matches. If one made a purchase one received a box of matches free, a stylishly ample one. Further, there was a huge cigar-cutter which Herr Lohberg always had at hand, and if one wanted to light one's cigar on the spot, then with a sharp little click he snipped off the end that one held out to him. It was a good place to spend one's time in, bright and sunny and hospitable behind its plate-glass windows, and during these cold days full of a sort of pleasant smooth warmth that lay on the white floor-tiles and was a welcome change from the dusty, overheated atmosphere of the glass cage in the warehouse. But while that was sufficient reason for liking to come here after one's work or during the lunch-hour, it had no further significance. At these times one was full of praise for neatness and order, and grumbled at the filth one had to slave among; yet one did not intend this quite seriously, for Esch knew quite well that the perfect orderliness which he kept in his books and his goods lists couldn't be imposed on piles of packing-cases and bales and barrels, no matter how good the foreman might be at his job. But here in this shop, on the other hand, a curiously satisfying sense of order, an almost feminine precision, ruled, and this seemed all the stranger to Esch because he could scarcely picture to himself, or only with discomfort, girls selling cigars; in spite of all its cleanliness it was a job for men, a thing suggesting good-fellowship; yes, this was what friendship between men should be like, and not careless and perfunctory like the casual helpfulness of a trade-union secretary. But these were things which Esch really did not bother his mind about; they occurred to him only by the way. On the other hand, it was both funny and curious that Lohberg shouldn't be content with a job that suited him so well and in which he might have been happy, and still funnier were the grounds that he offered for his dissatisfaction, and in advancing which he showed so clearly that he was a fool. For although he had hung over the automatic cash register a board with the inscription: "Smoking has never harmed anybody";

although his boxes of cigars were accompanied by neat cards which displayed not only his business address and the names of the different brands, but also a little couplet: “Smoke good and pure tobacco every day, And you will have no doctors’ bills to pay,” yet he himself did not believe in these sentiments; indeed he smoked his own cigarettes simply from a sense of duty and because his conscience pricked him, and, in perpetual dread of so-called smoker’s cancer, constantly felt in his stomach, his heart, his throat, all the evil symptoms of nicotine-poisoning. He was a lank little man with a dark shadow of a moustache and lifeless eyes which showed a great deal of white, and his somewhat coy charm and bearing were just as incompatible with his general principles as the business which he carried on and had no thought of exchanging for another; for he was not content to regard tobacco as a popular poison undermining the national well-being, perpetually reiterating that the people must be saved from this virus; no, he was also an advocate of a spacious, natural, genuinely German way of life, and it was a great disappointment to him that he could not live in the open air, a deep-chested, blond giant. For this deprivation, however, he partly compensated himself by subscribing to anti-alcoholic and vegetarian associations, and so beside the cash register there was always lying a pile of pamphlets on such subjects, most of them sent to him from Switzerland. No doubt about it, he was a pure fool.

Now Esch, who smoked cigars and drank wine and treated himself to huge portions of meat whenever he had the chance, might not have been so deeply impressed by Herr Lohberg’s arguments, in spite of the persuasive phrases about saving the people which always recurred in them, if he had not been struck by a curious parallelism between them and the principles of Mother Hentjen. Of course Mother Hentjen was a sensible woman, even an unusually sensible woman, and so her opinions had nothing in common with Lohberg’s jargon. Yet when Lohberg, true to the Calvinistic convictions which reached him from Switzerland along with his pamphlets, inveighed like a priest against sensual indulgence and in the same breath pleaded like a Socialist orator addressing a Freethinking audience for a free and simple life in the bosom of nature; when in his own modest way he let it be understood that there was something amiss with the world, a glaring error in the books which could only be put right by a wonderful new entry, in all this confusion only one thing was absolutely clear, that Mother Hentjen’s restaurant was in the same case as Lohberg’s tobacconist shop: she had to depend for her living on the men who boozed at her tables, and she too hated her business and her customers. No doubt about it, it was a queer coincidence, and Esch half thought of writing to Frau Hentjen to tell her about it, it would interest her. But he dropped the idea when he reflected that Frau Hentjen might think it odd, perhaps even feel insulted, to be compared with a man who, in spite of all his virtues, was an idiot. So he saved it up until he should see her; in any case he would soon have to go to Cologne on business.

All the same the case of Lohberg was well worth mentioning; and one evening, while Esch was sitting at dinner with Korn and Fräulein Erna, he gave way to his desire to talk about it.

Of course the two Korns knew of Lohberg. Korn had already been in his shop several times, but he had observed none of the man’s peculiarities. “One wouldn’t think it to see him,” he said, after an interval of silent thought, and agreed with Esch that the man was a fool. But Fräulein Erna seemed to be seized with a violent aversion to this spiritual double of Frau Hentjen, and inquired sharply whether Frau Hentjen perchance was Herr Esch’s long and carefully concealed lady-love. She must be a very virtuous lady, no doubt, but Fräulein Erna thought all the same that she herself was just as good. And as for Herr Lohberg’s virtuous scruples, of course it wasn’t nice when a man made the curtains stink with his perpetual smoking as her brother did. Yet on the other hand one knew at least that there was a man about the house. “A man that does nothing but drink water …” she searched for words, “would sicken me.” And then she inquired, did Herr Lohberg even know what it was to have a woman? “He’s still an innocent, I suppose, the fool,” said Esch, and Korn, foreseeing that there was sport to be had out of him yet, exclaimed: “A pure Joseph!”

Whether for this purpose, or because he wished to keep an eye on his lodger, or simply by pure chance, Korn too now became a regular customer of Lohberg’s, and Lohberg shrank every time that the Herr Customs Inspector noisily entered his shop. His fear was not without cause. A few evenings later the blow fell; shortly before closing time Korn appeared with Esch and commanded: “Make yourself ready, my lad; to-night you’re going to lose your innocence.” Lohberg rolled his eyes helplessly and pointed to a man in the uniform of the Salvation Army who was standing in the shop. “Fancy dress?” said Korn, and Lohberg stammeringly introduced the man: “A friend of mine.” “We’re friends too,” replied Korn, holding out his paw to the Salvation Army soldier. He was a freckled, somewhat pimply, red-haired youth, who had learned that one must be friendly to every soul one meets; he smiled in Korn’s face and rescued Lohberg: “Brother Lohberg has promised to testify in our ranks to-night. I’ve come to fetch him.” “So, you’re going out to testify? Then we’ll come too.” Korn was enthusiastic. “We’re all friends.” “Every friend is welcome,” said the joyful Salvation Army man. Lohberg was not consulted; he had the look of a thief caught in the act, and

closed up the shop with a guilty air. Esch had followed the proceedings with great amusement, yet as Korn's high-handedness annoyed him he clapped Lohberg jovially on the shoulder, reproducing the very gesture that Teltscher had often expended on him.

They made for the Neckar quarter. In Käfertalerstrasse they could already hear the beating of the drums and tambourines, and Korn's feet, as if remembering their time in the army, fell into step. When they came to the end of the street they saw the Salvation Army group standing at the corner of the park in the dying twilight. Watery sleet had fallen, and where the group was gathered the snow had melted into black slush which soaked through one's boots. The Lieutenant was standing on a wooden bench and cried into the falling darkness: "Come to us and be saved, poor wandering sinners, the Saviour is near!" But only a few had answered his call, and when his soldiers, with drums and tambourines beating, sang of the redeeming love and made their chorus resound: "Lord God of Sabaoth save, Oh, save our souls from Hell," hardly anybody in the crowd standing round joined in, and it was obvious that the majority were merely looking on out of curiosity. And although the honest soldiers sang on lustily, and the two girls struck their tambourines with all their might, the crowd grew thinner and thinner as the light faded, and soon they were left alone with their Lieutenant, their only audience now being Lohberg, Korn and Esch. Yet even now Lohberg was probably ready to join in the hymn, and indeed he would certainly have done so without feeling either embarrassed or intimidated by Esch and Korn if Korn had not kept on digging him in the ribs and saying: "Sing, Lohberg!" It wasn't a very pleasant situation for Lohberg, and he was glad when a policeman arrived and ordered them to move on. They all set out for the Thomasbräu cellar. And yet it was almost a pity that Lohberg hadn't joined in the singing, yes, then perhaps a minor miracle might have happened, for it wouldn't have taken much to make Esch too lift up his voice in praise of the Saviour and His redeeming love; indeed only a slight impetus would have been required, and perhaps the sound of Lohberg's voice would have provided it. But one can never be sure of those things afterwards.

Esch himself could not make out what had happened to him at the open-air meeting: the two girls had beaten their tambourines when the officer standing on the bench gave the signal, and that had reminded him strangely of the commands which Teltscher gave Ilona on the stage. Perhaps it was the sudden dead silence of the evening that had affected him, for there at the outskirts of the city the sounds of the evening broke off as abruptly as the music in the theatre; perhaps it was the motionlessness of the black trees that gazed up into the darkening sky; and then behind him in the square the arc-lamps had flared out. It was all incomprehensible. The biting coldness of the wet snow had pierced through his shoes; but that was not the only reason why Esch would have liked to be standing up there on the bench pointing out the way of salvation, for his old strange feeling of orphaned isolation had returned again, and suddenly it had become dreadfully clear to him that some time he would have to die in utter and complete loneliness. A vague and yet unforeseen hope had risen in him that things would go better, far better, with him if he could but stand up there on the bench; and he saw Ilona, Ilona in the Salvation Army uniform, gazing up at him and waiting for his redeeming signal to strike the tambourine and cry "Hallelujah!" But Korn was standing beside him, grinning out from between the great upturned collars of his damp customs cloak, and at the sight of him Esch's hopes had ignominiously melted away. Esch's mouth twisted wryly, his expression became contemptuous, and all at once he was almost glad to be orphaned and alone. In any case he too was relieved that the policeman had moved them on.

Lohberg was walking in front with the pimply Salvation Army man and one of the girls. Esch trudged behind. Yes, whether a girl like that beat a tambourine or threw plates, one only had to order her to do it, it was just the same, only the clothes were different. They sang about love in the Salvation Army as in the theatre. "Perfect redeeming love," Esch had to laugh, and he decided to sound the good Salvation Army girl on this question. When they were nearing the Thomasbräu cellar the girl stopped, planted her foot on a ledge projecting from the wall, bent down, and began to tie the laces of her wet, shapeless boots. As she stood there bent double, her black hat almost touching her knee, she looked lumpish and hardly human, a monstrosity, yet with a certain, as it were, mechanical effectiveness of structure, and Esch, who in other circumstances would have requited such a posture with a clap on the part most saliently exposed, was a little alarmed that no desire to do so awoke in him, and it almost seemed as though another bridge between him and his fellow-creatures had been broken, and he felt homesick for Cologne. That day in the kitchen he had wanted to take hold of Mother Hentjen under the breasts; yes, he would not have been put off had Mother Hentjen bent down and laced her shoes. But as all men have the same thoughts, Korn, who felt on good terms with all the world, now pointed to the girl: "Any chance with her, do you think?" Esch threw him a furious glance, but Korn did not stop: "Among themselves they're probably hot enough, the soldiers." Meanwhile they had reached the Thomasbräu cellar, and they walked into the bright, noisy room, which smelt pleasantly of roast beef, onions and beer.

Here, at any rate, Korn met with a disappointment. For the Salvation Army people were not to be

prevailed upon to sit down at the same table; they said good-bye and gathered at one end of the room to distribute the *War Cry*. Esch too would have preferred not to be left alone with Korn; some remnant of hope still fluttered in his soul that these people might be able to bring back to him what he had felt under the darkening trees and yet had not been able to grasp. But it was a good thing, on the other hand, that they were now beyond the reach of Korn's raillery, and it would have been still better if they had taken Lohberg with them, for Korn was now anxious to get his own back and was beginning his joke at Lohberg's expense by trying to make the helpless fellow violate his principles with the aid of a portion of steak and onions and a great jug of beer. But the ninny stood his ground, merely saying in a quiet voice: "You shouldn't joke with a fellow's convictions," and touched neither the meat nor the beer, and Korn, once more disappointed, had to be content with morosely devouring them himself, so that they might not be wasted. Esch contemplated the dark residue of beer at the bottom of his jug; absurd to think that one's salvation could depend on whether one drank that up or not. All the same he felt almost grateful to the mild and obstinate fool. Lohberg sat there smiling meekly, and sometimes one almost expected tears to start to his great eyes with the exposed whites. Yet when the Salvation Army people in their round of the tables drew near again he stood up and it looked as though he were about to shout something to them. Against Esch's expectations he did not do so, but simply remained standing where he was. Then suddenly he uttered without warning or reason a single word, a word quite incomprehensible to everyone who heard it; he uttered loudly and distinctly the word "Redemption," and then sat down again. Korn looked at Esch and Esch looked at Korn. But when Korn put his finger to his brow and twirled it to indicate that Lohberg was weak in the head, the whole situation changed in the most extraordinary and terrifying manner, for it was as though the word of redemption, now set free, hovered over the table maintained in its detachment by an invisibly revolving mechanism, detached even from the mouth that had uttered it. And although Esch's contempt for Lohberg remained undiminished, yet it seemed now that the kingdom of salvation did exist, could exist, must exist, if only because Korn, that dead lump of flesh, was sitting on his broad hindquarters in the Thomasbräu cellar, quite incapable of sending his thoughts even as far as the next street corner, far less of losing them in the infinite spaces of freedom. And although, in spite of these ideas, Esch refused to act the prig, but instead rapped with his jug on the table and ordered another beer, yet he too became silent like Lohberg; and when on rising to leave Korn proposed that they should take the pure Joseph to visit the girls, Esch refused to second him, left a completely disappointed Balthasar Korn standing on the pavement, and escorted the tobacconist home, quite pleased that Korn should shout insults after them. It had stopped snowing, and in the warm wind that had risen Korn's rude words fluttered past like light spring blossoms.

Driven by that extraordinary oppression which falls on every human being when, childhood over, he begins to divine that he is fated to go on in isolation and unaided towards his own death; driven by this extraordinary oppression, which may with justice be called a fear of God, man looks round him for a companion hand in hand with whom he may tread the road to the dark portal, and if he has learned by experience how pleasurable it undoubtedly is to lie with another fellow-creature in bed, then he is ready to believe that this extremely intimate association of two bodies may last until these bodies are coffined: and even if at the same time it has its disgusting aspects, because it takes place under coarse and badly aired sheets, or because he is convinced that all a girl cares for is to get a husband who will support her in later life, yet it must not be forgotten that every fellow-creature, even if she has a sallow complexion, sharp, thin features and an obviously missing tooth in her left upper jaw, yearns, in spite of her missing tooth, for that love which she thinks will for ever shield her from death, from that fear of death which sinks with the falling of every night upon the human being who sleeps alone, a fear that already licks her as with a tongue of flame when she begins to take off her clothes, as Fräulein Erna was doing now; she laid aside her faded red-velvet blouse and took off her dark-green skirt and her petticoat. Then she drew off her shoes; but her stockings, on the other hand, as well as her white, starched under-petticoat, she kept on; indeed she could not even summon the resolution to undo her corsets. She was afraid, but she concealed her fear behind a knowing smile, and by the light of the flickering candle-flame on the bedside-table she slipped, without undressing further, into bed.

Now it came to pass that she heard Esch walking several times through the lobby, in doing which he made a greater noise than the necessary arrangements he was engaged in should have required. Perhaps these arrangements themselves were not indeed altogether necessary, for what need could there be to fetch water to his room twice? And the water-jug was surely not so heavy that he had to set it down with a bang in the passage immediately outside Erna's door. But every time that Fräulein Erna heard anything she resolved not to be outdone and made a noise too; stretched herself till the bed creaked, even pushed deliberately with her toes against the foot of it and sighed an audible "This is nice," as if she were sleepy; also she coughed and cleared her throat in pursuit of her purpose. Now Esch was an impetuous man, and

after they had telegraphed to each other in this way for a little while he walked resolutely into her room.

There lay Fräulein Erna in bed and smiled knowingly and slyly and yet a little invitingly at him with her missing tooth, and really she did not attract him very much. All the same he paid no attention to her protest: “But Herr Esch, you mustn’t stay here,” but remained calmly where he was; and he did this not merely because he was a man of coarse appetites, like most men, he did it not merely because two people of different sexes living on intimate terms in the same house can scarcely escape the automatic functioning of physical attraction, and with the reflection “Why not, after all,” will eventually yield casually to it, he did it not only because he divined that her feelings were much the same as his and so discounted her words, he did it therefore not simply in obedience to a low impulse, even if we add jealousy to it, the jealousy which any man might feel on seeing a woman flirting with Herr Gernerth; no, Esch did it because he was a man for whom it was essential that this pleasure, which people imagine one seeks for its own sake, should serve also a higher purpose, a purpose which he could scarcely name and yet felt bound to obey, but which nevertheless was nothing but the compulsion to put an end to a tremendous fear that extended far beyond himself, even if sometimes it might seem to be merely the fear that befalls the commercial traveller when, far from his wife and children, he lies down in his lonely hotel bed; the fear and desire of the traveller who resorts to the plain and elderly chambermaid, sometimes heart-broken by the squalor of the affair, and generally filled with remorse of conscience. Of course when Esch banged down his water-jug hard on the floor he was no longer thinking of the loneliness which had descended upon him since he had left Cologne, nor was he thinking of the isolation that had lain on the stage before Teltscher let fly the whistling, glittering daggers. Yet now that he sat on the edge of Fräulein Erna’s bed and bent over her in desire, he wanted more from her than is currently construed as the satisfaction of an average sensual man’s lust, for behind the very palpable, indeed banal, immediate object of desire, yearning was hidden, the yearning of the captive soul for redemption from its loneliness, for a salvation which should embrace himself and her, yes, perhaps all mankind, and most certainly Ilona, a salvation which Erna could not vouchsafe him, because neither she nor he knew what he wanted. So the rage which seized him when she refused him the final favour and gently said: “When we’re man and wife,” was neither merely the rage of the thwarted male, nor simple fury at the discovery of the trick she had played him in only half-undressing; it was more, it was despair, even if the words with which, sobered now, he rudely replied, were by no means high-sounding: “Well, it’s all off, then.” And although her refusal seemed to him a sign from God warning him to be chaste, he left the house immediately and went to a more willing lady. And that deeply wounded Erna.

From that evening there was open war between Esch and Fräulein Erna. She let no opportunity pass of provoking his desire, and he no less eagerly seized every pretext to renew his attempt and to lure the recalcitrant one into his bed without promise of marriage. The battle began in the morning when she brought his breakfast into his room before he was properly dressed, a lascivious kind of mothering that maddened him; and it ended in the evening in indifference, whether she had barred her door or let him in. Neither of them ever mentioned the word love, and the fact that open hatred did not break out between them, but was dissembled in spiteful jests, was due simply to the other fact that they had not yet possessed each other.

Often he thought that with Ilona things must be different and better, but strangely enough his thoughts did not dare to rise to her. She was something better, much in the same way as the Chairman of the company, Bertrand, was something better. And Esch did not even mind very much that one of Erna’s tricks was to frustrate any chance of his meeting Ilona, indeed he was even glad of this, bitterly as he resented all her silly fuss and her tittering facetiousness. Meanwhile Ilona was about the place almost every day, and between her and Erna a sort of friendship had grown up, yet what they could find in each other was incomprehensible to Esch; if when he got home he smelt the cheap and powerful scent which Ilona used, and which always excited him, he was sure to find the two ladies in an extraordinary dumb dialogue; for Ilona knew scarcely a word of German and Fräulein Erna was forced to fall back on fondling her friend, stationing her before the mirror and admiringly patting and rearranging her coiffure and her dress. But generally Esch found himself excluded. For Erna now set herself to conceal from him even the presence of her friend in the house. So one evening he happened to be sitting quite innocently in his room when the door-bell rang. He heard Erna opening the door and would not have thought anything further about the matter if he had not suddenly heard the key of his door being turned. Esch made a spring for the door; he was locked in! The trollop had locked him in! And although he should simply have ignored the stupid joke, it was too much for him, and he began to bawl and bang on the door, until at last Fräulein Erna opened it and slipped into the room with a giggle. “Well,” she said, “now I can attend to you … we have a visitor, I may say, but Balthasar is looking after her all right.” Esch rushed out of the house in a rage.

When he returned late at night the lobby again reeked of Ilona’s perfume. So she must have come back

again, or rather she must still be here, for now he saw her hat hanging on the hat-rack. But where could she be? The parlour was dark. Korn was snoring next door. She simply couldn't have gone away without her hat! Esch listened at Erna's door; the agitating and oppressive thought came into his mind that the two women were lying in there side by side. He cautiously tried the door-handle; the door did not yield, it was barred as always when Fräulein Erna really wanted to sleep. Esch shrugged his shoulders and walked noisily to his room. But he could not rest in bed; he peered out into the passage; the perfume still hung in the air and the hat was still there. Something wasn't in order, one could feel that, and Esch stole through the house. It seemed to him that he could hear whispering in Korn's room; Korn wasn't the man to speak in a whisper, and Esch listened more intently: then suddenly Korn groaned, unmistakably he groaned, and Esch, a fellow who had no occasion to fear a man like Korn, fled back to his room in his bare feet as though something dreadful were pursuing him. He even felt he wanted to put his hands to his ears.

Next morning Erna awakened him out of a leaden sleep, and before he could bring out his question she said: "Hsh! I've a surprise for you. Get up at once!" He hastily put on his clothes, and when he walked into the kitchen, where Erna was busy, she took him by the hand and led him on tiptoe to her room, opened the door slightly and asked him to look in. There he saw Ilona; her round white arm, which still did not show any dagger wounds, was hanging over the edge of the bed, the heavy pouches under her eyes showed distinctly on her somewhat puffy face, and she was asleep.

Now Ilona frequently arrived at a late hour at the flat, and this lasted for a comparatively long time before Esch grasped the fact that she spent the night with Balthasar Korn and that Erna was shielding her brother's love affair, in a sense, with her own body.

Martin called on him at his work. It was extraordinary, the ease with which this pariah, whom every gate-keeper had orders to keep out, always managed to get himself admitted everywhere quite openly and swung at his ease on his crutches through places of business, nobody stopping him, many saluting him affectionately, partly no doubt because one was shy of appearing unkind to a cripple. Esch was not particularly pleased to receive a visit from a trade-union secretary at his work; Martin could just as well have waited for him outside, but on the other hand one could rely on his discretion; he knew the right time to come and the right time to go; he was a decent fellow. " 'Morning, August," he said. "I just wanted to see how you were getting on. You've a nice job here, made a good exchange." Did the cripple want to remind him that he had him to thank for being in this accursed Mannheim? All the same Martin could not be held responsible for the affair between Ilona and Korn, and so Esch simply replied in a morose voice: "Yes, a good exchange." And somehow it rang true. For now that Martin reminded him of his former job and Nentwig, Esch was jolly glad that he had nothing more to do with Cologne. Like a thief he still kept Nentwig's misdemeanour concealed, and the fact that one might come across the man's ugly mug at any street corner in Cologne took away all pleasure at the thought of returning there. Cologne or Mannheim, there was nothing to choose between them. Was there really any place where one could be rid of all this rottenness? Nevertheless he asked how things were in Cologne. "Later," said Martin, "I haven't time just now; where are you having your dinner?" And as soon as Esch told him he swung himself hastily away.

By now Esch really felt glad at meeting Martin again, and as he was an impatient fellow he could scarcely wait for the dinner-hour to come. Spring had arrived overnight, and Esch left his greatcoat in the office; the flagstones between the sheds were bright with the cool sunshine, and in the corners of the buildings young tender grass had suddenly appeared between the cobbles. As he passed the unloading stage he laid his hand on the iron bands with which the clumsy grey wooden erection was clamped together, and the iron too felt warm. If he shouldn't be transferred to Cologne he must arrange to have his bicycle sent on soon. He breathed in the air deeply and easily, and the food had quite a different taste; perhaps because the windows of the restaurant were open. Martin related that he had come to Mannheim on strike business; otherwise he would have taken his time. But something was happening in the South German and Alsatian factories, and such things soon spread: "For all I care they can strike as much as they like, only we can't afford any nonsense just now. A strike of the transport workers would be pure madness at the moment … we're a poor union and there's no money to be had from the central office … it would be a complete wash-out. Of course it's no use talking to a docker: if a donkey like that makes up his mind to go on strike nothing will stop him. But sooner or later they'll have my blood yet." He said all this indulgently, without bitterness. "Now they're raising the cry again that I'm being paid by the shipping companies." "By Bertrand?" asked Esch with interest. Geyring nodded: "By Bertrand too, of course." "A proper swine," Esch could not help saying. Martin laughed. "Bertrand? He's a very decent fellow." "Oho, so he's a decent fellow? Is it true that he's a renegade officer?" "Yes, he's supposed to have quit the service—but that only speaks in the man's favour." Oho, that spoke in the man's favour, did it? Nothing was clear and simple, thought Esch in anger, nothing was clear and simple, even on a lovely spring day like this: "All I would like to know is why you stick to

this job of yours." "Everybody must stay where God has put him," said Martin, and his old-young face took on a pious look. Then he told Esch that Mother Hentjen sent her greetings and that everybody was looking forward to seeing him soon.

After dinner they went along to Lohberg's shop. They were in no hurry, and so Martin rested in the massive oaken chair that stood beside the counter and was as bright and solid as everything else in the shop. Accustomed to pick up anything in print that came within his reach, Martin glanced through the anti-alcoholic and vegetarian journals from Switzerland. "Dear, dear!" he said, "here's almost a comrade of mine." Lohberg felt flattered, but Esch spoilt his pleasure for him: "Oh, he's one of the teetotal wash-outs," and to crush him completely he added: "Geyring has a big meeting to-night, but a real one—not a meeting of the Salvation Army!" "Unfortunately," said Martin. Lohberg, who had a great weakness for public demonstrations and oratorical performances, proposed immediately to go. "I advise you not to," said Martin. "Esch at least mustn't go, it might go badly with him if he were seen there. Besides, there's bound to be trouble." Esch really had no anxiety about endangering his post, yet strangely enough to attend the meeting seemed to him an act of treachery towards Bertrand. Lohberg, on the other hand, said boldly: "I'll go in any case," and Esch felt shamed by the teetotal ninny; no, it would never do to leave a friend in the lurch; if he did he would never dare to face Mother Hentjen again. But meanwhile he said nothing about his decision. Martin explained: "I fancy that the shipping companies will send an *agent provocateur* or two; it's all to their interest that the strike should be as violent as possible." And although Nentwig was not a shipper, but only the greasy head clerk in a firm of wine merchants, to Esch it seemed that the rascal had his greasy fingers in this piece of perfidy too.

The meeting took place, as was usual in such cases, in the public room of a small tavern. A few policemen were standing before the entrance keeping an eye on those who went in, who on their side pretended not to notice the policemen. Esch arrived late; as he was about to enter someone tapped him on the shoulder, and when he turned round he saw it was the inspector of the dock police squad: "Why, what takes you here, Herr Esch?" Esch thought quickly. Actually simple curiosity; he had learned that Geyring, the trade-union secretary, whom he had known in Cologne, was to speak, and as in a way he was connected with shipping he felt interested in the whole business. "I advise you against it, Herr Esch," said the inspector, "and just because you're in a shipping firm; it will look fishy, and it can't do you any good." "I'll just look in for a minute," Esch decided, and went in.

The low room, adorned with portraits of the Kaiser, the Grand Duke of Baden, and the King of Württemberg, was crammed full. On the raised platform stood a table covered with a white cloth, behind which four men were sitting; Martin was one of them. Esch, at first a little envious because he too was not sitting in such a prominent position, was surprised next moment that he had noticed the table at all, so great was the uproar and disorder in the room. Indeed it was some time before he noticed that a man had mounted on a chair in the middle of the hall and was shouting out an incomprehensible rigmarole, emphasizing every word—he seemed to love particularly the word "demagogue"—with a sweeping gesture, as though to fling it at the table on the platform. It was a sort of unequal dialogue, for the only reply from the table was the thin tinkle of a bell which did not pierce the din; yet it finally had the last say when Martin, supporting himself on his crutches and the back of his chair, got up, and the noise ebbed. True, it wasn't very easy to grasp what Martin, with the somewhat weary and ironical fluency of a practised speaker, was saying, but that he was worth twice all these people bawling at him Esch could see. It almost looked as though Martin had no wish to get a hearing, for with a faint smile he stopped and let the shouts of "Capitalist pimp!" "Twister!" and "Kaiser's Socialist!" pass over him, until suddenly, amid the whistling and cat-calls, a sharper whistle was heard. In the sudden silence a police officer appeared on the platform and said curtly: "In the name of the law I declare this meeting closed; the hall must be cleared." And while Esch was being borne through the door by the crush he had time to see the police officer turning to Martin.

As if by arrangement the most of the audience had made for the side-door of the tavern. But that did not help them much, for meanwhile the whole place had been encircled by the police, and every one of them had either to explain his presence or go to the police station. At the front entrance the crush was not so great; Esch had the good luck to encounter the dock inspector again and said hastily: "You were right, never again," and so he escaped interrogation. But the affair was not yet ended. The crowd now stood before the place quite quietly, contenting themselves with swearing softly at the committee, the union and Geyring. But all at once the rumour flew round that Geyring and the committee were arrested and that the police were only waiting for the crowd to disperse to lead them away. Then suddenly the feeling of the crowd swung round; whistles and cat-calls rose again, and the crowd made ready to rush the police. The friendly police inspector gave Esch a push: "You'd better disappear now, Herr Esch," and Esch, who saw that there was nothing else he could do, withdrew to the nearest street corner, hoping at least to run up against Lohberg.

Before the hall the noise still went on for a good while. Then six mounted police arrived at a sharp trot, and because horses, who although docile are yet somewhat insane creatures, exert on many human beings a sort of magical influence, this little equestrian reinforcement was decisive. Esch looked on while a number of workers in handcuffs were led away amid the terrified silence of their comrades, and then the street emptied. Wherever the police, now become rough and impatient, saw two men standing together, they drove them harshly away, and Esch, considering with good reason that he would be handled just as ruthlessly, vacated the field.

He went to Lohberg's house. Lohberg had not yet returned, and Esch remained waiting before his door in the warm spring night. He hoped that they hadn't led Lohberg away too in handcuffs. Although really that would have been a good joke. Lord! what would Erna say if she saw this paragon of virtue before her in handcuffs? Just when Esch was about to give up his watch Lohberg arrived in a terribly excited state, and almost weeping. Bit by bit, and very disconnectedly, Esch managed to discover that at first the meeting had proceeded quite quietly, even if the audience had shouted all sorts of abuse at Herr Geyring, who had spoken very well. But then a man had got up, obviously one of those *agents provocateurs* whom Herr Geyring himself had mentioned at dinner-time, and had made a furious speech against the rich classes, the State and even the Kaiser himself, until the police officer threatened to close the meeting if anything else of that nature was said. Quite incomprehensibly Herr Geyring, who must have known quite well what sort of a bird he had to deal with, had not unmasked the man as an *agent provocateur*, but had actually come to his assistance and demanded freedom of speech for him. Well, after that it grew worse and worse, and finally the meeting was broken up. The committee and Herr Geyring were under arrest; he could vouch for that, for he had been among the last to leave the hall.

Esch felt upset, indeed more upset than he would admit. All that he knew was that he must have some wine if he was to bring order into the world again; Martin, who was against the strike, was arrested by police who were in with the shipping companies and a renegade officer, police who, in the most infamous manner, had seized an innocent man—perhaps because Esch himself had not handed Nentwig over to them! Yet the inspector had acted in a very friendly way towards him, actually had shielded him. Sudden anger at Lohberg overcame him; the confounded fool was probably so taken aback simply because he had expected harmless and uplifting twaddle about brotherhood and did not understand that things could turn to deadly earnest. Suddenly all this brotherhood twaddle seemed disgusting to Esch; what was the use of all these brotherhoods and associations? They only made the confusion greater and probably they were the cause of it; he brutally let fly at Lohberg: "For God's sake put away that cursed lemonade of yours, or I'll sweep it off the table … if only you drank honest wine you would be able at least to give a sensible answer to a plain question." But Lohberg only looked at him with his great uncomprehending eyes, in whose whites little red veins now appeared, and was in no state to resolve Esch's doubts, doubts which next day became much worse when he heard that as a protest against the arrest of their union secretary the transport and dock workers had gone on strike. Meanwhile Geyring was sentenced to await his trial for the crime of sedition.

During the performance Esch sat with Gernerth in the so-called manager's office, which always reminded him of his glass cage in the bonded warehouse. On the stage Teltscher and Ilona were going through their act, and he heard the whizzing knives striking against the black board. Above the writing-table was fixed a little white box marked with a red cross, supposed to contain bandages. For a long time it had certainly contained none, and for decades nobody had even opened it, yet Esch was convinced that at any moment Ilona might be carried in to have her bleeding wounds bound. But instead Teltscher appeared, slightly perspiring and slightly proud of himself, and wiping his hands on his handkerchief said: "Real work, good honest work … must be paid for." Gernerth made some calculations in his notebook: "theatre rent, 22 marks; tax, 16 marks; lighting, 4 marks; salaries …" "Oh, stow that!" said Teltscher. "I know it all by heart already. I've put four thousand crowns into this business and I'll never see them again … I'll just have to grin and bear it.… Herr Esch, don't you know anybody who would buy me out? He can have a twenty-per-cent rebate, and I'll give you ten-per-cent commission over and above." Esch had already heard these outbursts and these offers and no longer paid any attention to them, although he would gladly have bought out Teltscher to get rid both of him and Ilona.

Esch was in an ill humour. Since Martin's imprisonment life had become radically darker: the fact that his skirmishing with Erna had grown burdensome and intolerable was really secondary; but that Bertrand had bribed the police, and that the police had behaved abominably, was more than exasperating, and Ilona's relations with Korn, no longer concealed either by them or by Erna, were repulsive in his sight. It was disgusting. The very thought of it repelled him: Ilona, after all, was something superior. Yes, better that he should know nothing about her, and that she should disappear out of his life for ever. And Bertrand as well, along with his Central Rhine Shipping Company. This became quite clear to Esch for the first time now that

Ilona came in in her outdoor clothes and silently and seriously sat down without being accorded a glance by the two men. Korn would presently appear to take her away; lately he had been going in and out here quite at his ease.

Ilona had been overcome by a genuine passion for Balthasar Korn, perhaps because he reminded her of some sergeant whom she had loved in her youth, perhaps simply because he was such a complete contrast to the adroit, sickly, blasé Teltscher, who in spite of his sickliness was so essentially brutal. Frankly, Esch did not waste any thought on such things; enough that a woman whom he himself had renounced, because she was destined for a better fate, was now being degraded by a man like Korn. But Teltscher's attitude was quite inexplicable. The fellow was clearly a pimp, and yet that wasn't a thing to trouble one's head about. Besides, the whole business could not bring him in very much; Korn certainly was generous enough, and in the new clothes which he had given her Ilona really looked superb, so superb that Fräulein Erna no longer regarded her brother's expensive love affair with by any means the same favour as at first; but in spite of all this Ilona would accept no money from Korn, and he had literally to force his presents on her; so deeply did she love him.

Korn appeared at the door and Ilona flung herself on his uniformed breast with Eastern words of endearment. No, it was past endurance! Teltscher laughed: "See that you enjoy yourself," and as they went out together he shouted after her in Hungarian a few words, obviously spiteful, which earned him not only a glance full of hatred from Ilona, but also a half-joking, half-serious threat from Korn that he would give the Jewish knife-thrower a beating yet. Teltscher paid no attention to this, but returned to his beloved business speculations: "We must provide something that isn't too expensive and that will draw the crowd." "Oh, what an epoch-making discovery, Herr Teltscher-Teltini," said Gernerth, making calculations in his notebook again. Then he looked up: "What do you say to wrestling matches for women?" Teltscher whistled reflectively through his teeth: "Might be considered: of course that can't be done either without money." Gernerth scribbled in his notebook. "We'll need some money, but not so very much; women don't cost much. Then tights … we'll have to get someone interested in it." "I'm willing to teach them," said Teltscher, "and I can be the referee too. But here in Mannheim?" he made a contemptuous gesture, "there's no closing one's eyes to the fact that business is bad here. What do you say, Esch?" Esch had formed no definite opinion, but the hope rose within him that with a change of scene Ilona might be saved from Korn's clutches. And as it lay nearest to his heart, he replied that Cologne seemed to him a splendid place for staging wrestling matches; in the previous year wrestling matches had been given there in the circus, serious ones of course, and the place had been packed. "Ours will be serious too," Teltscher decided. They talked it over from all sides for a while longer, and finally Esch was empowered to discuss the matter, on his approaching visit to Cologne, with the theatrical agent, Oppenheimer, whom Gernerth would have written to in the interval. And if Esch should succeed in hunting up some money for the undertaking, it would not only be a friendly service, but he might get a percentage on it himself.

Esch knew at the moment of nobody likely to invest money. But in secret he thought of Lohberg, who might almost be regarded as a rich man. But would a pure Joseph have any interest in wrestling matches for women?

The arrests that had been made in advance of the strike had deprived the dock labourers of all their leaders, yet after ten days the strike was still lingering on. There were indeed some blacklegs, but they were too few to handle the railway freights, and since shipping in any case was partially paralysed, they were employed only on the most urgent work. In the bonded warehouses a Sabbath quiet reigned. Esch was annoyed, because it was unlikely that he could get away until the strike was over, and he lounged idly round the sheds, leaned against the door-posts, and finally sat down to write to Mother Hentjen. He gave her the details of Martin's arrest and told her about Lohberg, but he did not even mention Erna and Korn, for the mere thought of doing so disgusted him. Then he procured a fresh batch of picture postcards and addressed them to all the girls he had slept with in recent years, and whose names he could remember. Outside in the shadow the foremen and stevedores stood in a group, and behind the half-open sliding doors of an empty goods truck some men were playing cards. Esch wondered whom he should write to next, and tried to count in his head all the women he had ever had. He could not be sure of the total, and it was as if a column in his books would not balance properly, so to get it right he began to make a list of the names on a piece of paper, entering the month and year after each. Then he added them up and was satisfied, more especially as Korn came in boasting, as usual, what a fine woman Ilona was, and what a fiery Hungarian. Esch pocketed his list and let Korn go on talking; he would not be able to talk like that for much longer. Only let the strike once come to an end, and the Herr Customs Inspector would have to run all the way to Cologne for his Ilona, perhaps even farther still, to the end of the world. And he was almost sorry for the man because he did not know what was in store for him. Balthasar Korn went on boasting happily of his

conquest, and when he had said his say about Ilona he drew out a pack of cards. In brotherly amity they sought out a third man and settled down to play for the rest of the day.

In the evening Esch looked in on Lohberg, who was sitting in his shop with a cigarette in his mouth before a pile of vegetarian journals. He laid these aside when Esch came in and began to talk about Martin. “The world,” he said, “is poisoned, not only with nicotine and alcohol and animal food, but with a still worse poison that we can hardly even recognize … it’s just like boils breaking out.” His eyes were moist and looked feverish; he gave one an unhealthy impression; it seemed possible that there really was some poison working within him. Esch stood, lean and robust, in front of him, but his head was empty after so much card-playing and he did not catch the sense of these idiotic remarks, he hardly realized that they referred to Martin’s imprisonment; everything was wrapped in a fog of idiocy, and his only definite wish was to have the affair of the theatre partnership cleared up once and for all. Esch didn’t like hole-and-corner methods: “Will you go shares in Gernerth’s theatre?” The question took Lohberg quite by surprise, and opening his eyes wide he merely said: “Eh?” “I’m asking you, are you willing to go shares in the theatre business?” “But I have a tobacco business.” “You’ve been lamenting all this time that you don’t like it, and so I thought you might want a change.” Lohberg shook his head: “So long as my mother’s alive I’ll have to keep on the shop; the half of it’s hers.” “Pity,” said Esch, “Teltscher thinks that putting on women wrestlers would bring in a hundred-per-cent profit.” Lohberg did not even ask what the theatre had to do with wrestling, but merely said in his turn: “Pity.” Esch went on: “I’m as tired of my trade as you are of yours. They’re on strike now and there’s nothing to do but sit about, it’s enough to make one sick.” “What do you want to do, then? Are you going into the theatre business too?” Esch thought it over; that meant simply being tied to a stool in some dusty manager’s office beside Gernerth and Teltscher. The artists didn’t appeal to him now that he had been behind the scenes; they weren’t much better than Hede or Thusnelda. He had really no idea what he wanted to do; the day had been so stale. He said: “Clear out, to America.” In an illustrated journal he had seen pictures of New York; these now came into his head; there had been also a photograph of an American boxing match and that brought him back to the wrestling. “If I could make enough money out of it to pay my fare I’d go to America.” He was himself astonished to find that he meant it seriously, and now began seriously counting up his resources: he had nearly three hundred marks; if he put them into the wrestling business he could certainly increase them, and why shouldn’t he, a strong, capable man with book-keeping experience, try his luck in America as well as here? At the very least he would have seen a bit of the world. Perhaps Teltscher and Ilona might actually come to New York on that engagement Teltscher was always talking about. Lohberg interrupted his train of thought: “You have some knowledge of languages, but I haven’t, unfortunately.” Esch nodded complacently; yes, with his French he could manage somehow, and English couldn’t be so very much of a mystery; but Lohberg didn’t need to know languages in order to go shares in promoting wrestling bouts. “No, not for that, but for going to America,” Lohberg replied. And although to Lohberg it was almost inconceivable that any man, let alone himself, should live in any town but Mannheim, both Esch and he felt almost like fellow-travellers as they discussed the cost of the voyage and how the money could be raised. This discussion brought them back, by a natural concatenation of thought, to the chances of making money through women wrestlers, and after much hesitation Lohberg came to the conclusion that he could quite well abstract a thousand marks from his business and invest them with Gernerth. Of course that wouldn’t be enough to buy out Teltscher, but it was quite good for a start, especially when Esch’s three hundred were counted in.

The day had ended better than it began. As he went home Esch brooded over the problem of raising the rest of the money, and Fräulein Erna came into his mind.

Strong as was Erna’s temptation to bind Esch to her by financial obligations, she remained firm even here to her principle of parting with nothing except to her affianced husband. When she archly intimated this resolve Esch was indignant: what kind of a man did she think he was? Did she imagine he wanted the money for himself? But even as he said this he felt that it was beside the point; that it was not really the money that was in question, and that Fräulein Erna was much more in the wrong than she could ever be made to understand; of course the money was only a means of ransoming Ilona, of shielding defenceless girls from ever having knives hurled at them again; of course he didn’t want it for himself. But even that was by no means all, for over and above that he wanted nothing from Ilona herself—not he, not at the cost of other people’s money—and he was quite glad, too, to be in that position; he didn’t give a fig for Ilona, he was thinking of more important things, and he had every right to be angry when Erna supposed him to be self-seeking, every right to tell her rudely: well, she could keep her money, then. Erna, however, took his rudeness as an admission of guilt, exulted in having unmasked him, and giggled that she knew all about that, thinking meanwhile of a commercial traveller in Hof, who had not only enjoyed her favours, but had involved her in the more serious loss of fifty marks.

It was altogether a good day for Fräulein Erna. Esch had asked her for something which she could refuse him, and besides she was wearing a pair of new shoes that made her feel gay and looked well on her feet. She was ensconced on the sofa, and as a saucy and slightly mocking gesture she let her feet peep from under her skirt, and swung them to and fro; she liked the faint creaking of the leather and the pleasant tension across her instep. She had no desire to abandon this delightful conversation, and in spite of the rude end that Esch had put to it she asked again what he wanted so much money for. Esch once more remarked that she could keep it; Lohberg had been glad enough to get a share in the business. “Oh, Herr Lohberg,” said Fräulein Erna, “he has plenty, he can afford it.” And with that waywardness which characterizes many phases of love, and in virtue of which Fräulein Erna would have given herself to any chance comer rather than to Herr Esch, who was to be granted nothing except in wedlock, she was very eager now to infuriate him by giving the money to Lohberg instead of to him. She swung her feet to and fro. “Oh, well, in partnership with Herr Lohberg, that’s a different story. He’s a good business man.” “He’s an idiot!” said Esch, partly from conviction and partly from jealousy, a jealousy that pleased Fräulein Erna, for she had reckoned on it. She turned the knife in the wound: “I wouldn’t give it to *you*.” But her remark was strangely ineffective. What did it matter to him? He had given up Ilona, and it was really Korn’s business to redeem her from those knives. Esch looked at Erna’s swinging feet. She would open her eyes if she were told that her money was really to be applied in helping her brother’s affair. Of course even that wouldn’t do what was needed. Perhaps it was really Nentwig who should be made to pay. For if the world was to be redeemed one must attack the virus at its source, as Lohberg said; but that source was Nentwig, or perhaps even something hiding behind Nentwig, something greater—perhaps as great and as securely hidden in his inaccessibility as the chairman of a company—something one knew nothing about. It was enough to make a man angry, and Esch, who was a strong fellow and not in the least afflicted with nerves, felt inclined to stamp on Fräulein Erna’s swinging feet to make her quiet. She said: “Do you like my shoes?” “No,” retorted Esch. Fräulein Erna was taken aback. “Herr Lohberg would like them … when are you going to bring him here? You’ve simply been hiding him … out of jealousy, I suppose, Herr Esch?” Oh, he could bring the man round at once if she was so anxious to see him, remarked Esch, hoping privately that they would come to an understanding about the theatre business. “No need for him to come at once,” said Fräulein Erna, “but why not this evening for coffee?” All right, he’d arrange that, said Esch, and took himself off.

Lohberg came. He held his coffee-cup with one hand and stirred in it mechanically with the other. He left his spoon in the cup even while he was drinking, so that it hit him on the nose. Esch spread himself insolently, asking if Balthasar and Ilona were coming, and making all kinds of tactless remarks. Fräulein Erna took no notice of him. She regarded with interest Herr Lohberg’s rachitic head and his large white eyeballs; truly, he looked as if it would not take much to make him cry. And she wondered if, in the heat and ardour of love, he would be moved to tears; it annoyed her to think that her brother had pushed her into an unsatisfactory relation with Esch, a brute of a man who upset her, while only two or three houses farther away there was a well-established tradesman who blushed whenever she looked at him. Had he ever had a woman, she wondered, and to satisfy these speculations and to provoke Esch she skilfully piloted the conversation towards the subject of love. “Are you another of these born bachelors, Herr Lohberg? You’ll repent it when you’re old and done and have nobody to look after you.”

Lohberg blushed. “I’m only waiting for the right girl, Fräulein Korn.”

“And she hasn’t turned up yet?” Fräulein Korn smiled encouragingly and pointed her toe under the hem of her skirt. Lohberg set down his cup and looked helpless.

Esch said tartly: “He hasn’t tried yet, that’s all.”

Lohberg’s convictions came to his support: “One can only love once, Fräulein Korn.”

“Oh!” said Fräulein Korn.

That was clear and unambiguous. Esch was almost ashamed of his unchaste life, and it seemed to him not improbable that this great and unique love was what Frau Hentjen had felt for her husband, and perhaps that was why she now expected chastity and restraint from her customers. All the same it must be dreadful for Frau Hentjen to have to pay for her brief wedded bliss by renouncing love for ever afterwards, and so he said: “Well, but what about widows, then? At that rate, a widow shouldn’t go on living … especially if she has no children …” and because he was observant of what he read in the illustrated papers he added: “Widows ought in that case really to be burned, so that … so that they might be redeemed, in a manner of speaking.”

“You’re a brute, Herr Esch,” said Fräulein Erna. “Herr Lohberg would never say such things.”

“Redemption is in God’s hands,” said Herr Lohberg, “if He grants anyone the great gift of love it will last for all eternity.”

“You’re a clever man, Herr Lohberg, and lots of people would be the better of taking your words to heart,” said Fräulein Erna, “the very idea of letting oneself be burned for any man! The impudence …”

Esch said: “If the world was as it should be it could be redeemed without any of your silly organizations … yes, you can both look incredulous,” he almost shouted, “but there would be no need for a Salvation Army if the police locked up all the people who deserved to be locked up … instead of the ones that are innocent.”

“I wouldn’t marry any man unless he had a pension, or could leave something for his widow, some kind of security,” said Fräulein Erna, “that’s only what one is entitled to expect from a good man.”

Esch despised her. Mother Hentjen would never think of talking in such a way. But Lohberg said: “It’s a bad provider who doesn’t set his house in order.”

“You’ll make your wife a happy woman,” said Fräulein Erna.

Lohberg went on: “If God blesses me with a wife, I hope I can say with confidence that we shall live in true Christian unity. We shall renounce the world and live for each other.”

Esch jeered: “Just like Balthasar and Ilona … and every evening she gets knives chucked at her.”

Lohberg was indignant: “A man who drinks cheap spirits can’t appreciate crystal-clear water, Fräulein Korn. A passion of that kind isn’t love.”

Fräulein Erna took the crystalline purity as a reference to herself and was flattered: “That dress he gave her cost thirty-eight marks. I found that out in the shop. To fleece a man like that … I could never bring myself to do it.”

Esch said: “Things need to be set right. An innocent man sits in jail, and another runs around as he pleases; one ought either to do *him* in or do oneself in.”

Lohberg soothed him down: “Human life isn’t to be lightly taken.”

“No,” said Fräulein Erna, “if anyone should be done in it’s a woman who has no feelings where men are concerned … as for me, when I have a man to look after I’m a woman of feeling.”

Lohberg said: “A genuine Christian love is founded on mutual respect.”

“And you would respect your wife even if she weren’t as educated as yourself … but more a creature of feeling, as a woman should be.”

“Only a person of feeling is capable of receiving the redeeming grace and ready for it.”

Fräulein Erna said: “I’m sure you’re a good son, Herr Lohberg, one that is capable of feeling gratitude for all his mother has done for him.”

That made Esch angry, angrier than he knew: “Good son or no … I don’t give *that* for gratitude; as long as people look on while injustice is being done there’s no grace in the world … why has Martin sacrificed himself and been put in jail?”

Lohberg answered: “Herr Geyring is a victim of the poison that’s destroying the world. Only when they get back to nature will people stop hurting each other.”

Fräulein Erna said that she too was a lover of nature and often went for long walks.

Lohberg went on: “Only in God’s good air, that lifts our hearts up, are men’s nobler feelings awakened.”

Esch said: “That kind of thing has never got a single man out of jail yet.”

Fräulein Erna remarked: “That’s what you say … but I say, a man with no feelings is no man at all. A man as faithless as you are, Herr Esch, has no right to put in his word.… And men are all the same.”

“How can you think so badly of the world, Fräulein Korn?”

She sighed: “The disappointments of life, Herr Lohberg.”

“But hope keeps our hearts up, Fräulein Korn.”

Fräulein Erna gazed thoughtfully into space: “Yes, if it weren’t for hope …” then she shook her head: “Men have no feelings, and too much brains is just as bad.”

Esch wondered if Frau Hentjen and her husband had spoken in that strain when they got engaged. But Lohberg said: “In God and in God’s divine Nature is hope for all of us.”

Erna did not want to be outdone: “I go regularly to church and confession, thank God …” and with triumph she added: “Our holy Catholic faith has more feeling in a way than the Protestant religion—if I were a man I would never marry a Protestant.”

Lohberg was too polite to contradict her:

“All ways to God are equally worthy of respect. And those whom God has joined will learn from Him to live peaceably together … all that is needed is good will.”

Lohberg’s virtue once more disgusted Esch, although he had often compared him with Mother Hentjen because of that same virtue. He burst out: “Any idiot can talk.”

Fräulein Erna said with disdain: “Herr Esch, of course, would take anybody he came across, he doesn’t bother about such things as feelings or religion; all he asks is that she should have money.”

He simply couldn’t believe that, said Herr Lohberg.

“Oh, you can take my word for it, I know him, he has no feelings, and he never thinks about anything … the kind of thoughts you have, Herr Lohberg, aren’t to be found in everybody.”

But if that were so he was sorry for Herr Esch, remarked Lohberg, for that meant he would never find happiness in this world.

Esch shrugged his shoulders. What did this fellow know about the new world? He said contemptuously: “First set the world right.”

But Fräulein Erna had found the solution: “If two people worked together, if your wife, for instance, were to help you in your business, then everything else would be all right, even if the man was a Protestant and the wife a Catholic.”

“Of course,” said Lohberg.

“Or if two people should have something in common, a common interest, as they say … then they must stand by each other, mustn’t they?”

“Of course,” said Lohberg.

Fräulein Erna’s lizard eye glanced at Esch as she said: “Would you have any objections, Herr Lohberg, if I joined you in the theatre business that Herr Esch was speaking of? Now that my brother has lost his senses I at least must try to bring in some money.”

How could Herr Lohberg have any objection! And when Fräulein Erna said that she would invest the half of her savings, say about a thousand marks, he cried, and she was delighted to hear it: “Oh! Then we’ll be partners.”

In spite of this Esch was dissatisfied. The fact that he had got his own way had all at once ceased to matter, maybe because in any case he had renounced Ilona, maybe because there were more important aims at stake, but perhaps only because—and this was the sole reason of which he was conscious—he suddenly had serious misgivings.

“Talk it over first with Gernerth, the manager of the theatre. I’ve only told you about it, I don’t accept any responsibility.”

“Oh yes,” said Fräulein Erna, she knew well enough that he was an irresponsible man, and he didn’t need to be afraid that he would be called to account. He wasn’t much of a Christian, and she thought more of Herr Lohberg’s little finger than of Herr Esch’s whole body. And wouldn’t Herr Lohberg come in now and then for a cup of coffee? Yes? And since it was getting late, and they had already got to their feet, she took Lohberg by the arm. The lamp above them shed a mild light upon their heads, and they stood before Esch like a newly engaged couple.

Esch had taken off his coat and hung it on the stand. Then he began to brush and beat it and examined its worn collar. Again he was conscious of some discrepancy in his calculations. He had given up Ilona, yet he was supposed to look on while Erna turned away from him and set her cap at that idiot. It was against all the laws of book-keeping, which demanded that every debit entry should be balanced by a credit one. Of course—and he shook the coat speculatively—if he chose he could keep a Lohberg from getting the better of *him*; he was easily a match for the man; no, August Esch was far from being such an ugly monstrosity, and he actually took a step or two towards the door, but paused before he opened it; tut, he didn’t choose to, that was all. The creature across the passage might think he had come crawling to her out of gratitude for her measly thousand marks. He turned and sat down on his bed, where he unlaced his shoes. The balance was all right, so far. And the fact that he was at bottom resentful because he couldn’t sleep with Erna, that was all right, too. One cut one’s losses. Yet there was an obscure miscalculation somewhere that he couldn’t put his finger on: granted that he wasn’t going across the passage to that woman, granted that he was giving up his bit of fun, what was his real reason for doing so? Was it perhaps to escape marriage? Was he making the smaller sacrifice to escape the greater, to avoid paying in person? Esch said: “I’m a swine.” Yes, he was a swine, not a whit better than Nentwig, who also shuffled off responsibility. His accounts were in a disorder which it would take the devil and all to clear up.

But disorderly accounts meant a disorderly world, and a disorderly world meant that Ilona would go on being a target for knives, that Nentwig would continue with brazen hypocrisy to evade punishment, and that Martin would sit in jail for ever. He thought it all over, and as he slipped off his drawers the answer came spontaneously: the others had given their money for the wrestling business, and so he, who had no money, must give himself, not in marriage, certainly, but in personal service, to the new undertaking. And since that, unfortunately, did not fit in with his job in Mannheim, he must simply give notice. That was the way he could pay his debt. And as if in corroboration of this conclusion, he suddenly realized that he ought not to remain any longer with a company that had been the means of putting Martin in jail. No one could accuse him of disloyalty; even the Herr Chairman would have to admit that Esch was a decent fellow. This new idea drove Erna out of his head, and he lay down in bed relieved and comforted. Going back to Cologne and to Mother Hentjen’s would, of course, be pleasant, and that diminished his sacrifice a little, but so little that it hardly counted; after all, Mother Hentjen hadn’t even answered his letter. And there were

restaurants a-plenty in Mannheim. No, the return to Cologne, that unjust town, was a very negligible offset to his sacrifice; it was at most an entry in the petty-cash account, and a man could always credit himself with petty cash. His eagerness to report his success drove him to see Gernerth early next morning: it was no small feat to have raised two thousand marks so quickly! Gernerth clapped him on the shoulder and called him the devil of a fellow. That did Esch good. Yet his decision to give up his job and take service in the theatre astounded Gernerth; he could not, however, produce any valid objection. “We’ll manage it somehow, Herr Esch,” he said, and Esch went off to the head office of the Central Rhine Shipping Company.

In the upper floors of the head office buildings there were long, hushed corridors laid with brown linoleum. On the doors were stylish plates bearing the names of the occupants, and at one end of each corridor, behind a table lit by a standard lamp, sat a man in uniform who asked what one wanted and wrote down one’s name and business on a duplicate block. Esch traversed one of the corridors, and since it was for the last time he took good note of everything. He read every name on the doors, and when to his surprise he came on a woman’s name, he paused and tried to imagine what she would be like: was she an ordinary clerk casting up accounts at a sloping desk with black cuffs over her sleeves, and would she be cool and offhand with visitors like all the others? He felt a sudden desire for the unknown woman behind the door, and there arose in him the conception of a new kind of love, a simple, one might almost say a business-like and official kind of love, a love that would run as smoothly, as calmly, and yet as spaciously and neverendingly, as these corridors with their polished linoleum. But then he saw the long series of doors with men’s names, and he could not help thinking that a lone woman in that masculine environment must be as disgusted with it as Mother Hentjen was with her business. A hatred of commercial methods stirred again within him, hatred of an organization that, behind its apparent orderliness, its smooth corridors, its smooth and flawless book-keeping, concealed all manner of infamies. And that was called respectability! Whether head clerk or chairman of a company, there was nothing to choose between one man of business and another. And if for a moment Esch had regretted that he was no longer a unit in the smoothly running organization, no longer privileged to go out and in without being stopped or questioned or announced, his regret now vanished, and he saw only a row of Nentwigs sitting behind these doors, all of them pledged and concerned to keep Martin languishing in confinement. He would have liked to go straight down to the counting-house and tell the blind fools there that they too should break out of their prison of hypocritical ciphers and columns and like him set themselves free; yes, that was what they should do, even at the risk of having to join him in emigrating to America.

“But it’s a pretty short star turn you’ve given us here,” the staff manager said when he gave in his notice and asked for a testimonial, and Esch felt tempted to divulge the real reasons for his departure from such a despicable firm. But he had to leave them unsaid, for the friendly staff manager immediately bent his attention to other matters, although he repeated once or twice: “A short star turn … a short star turn,” in an unctuous voice, as if he liked the phrase and as if he were hinting that theatrical life wasn’t so very different from or even superior to the business that Esch was relinquishing. What could the staff manager know about it? Was he really reproaching Esch with disloyalty and planning to catch him unawares? To trip him up in his new job? Esch followed his movements with a suspicious eye and with a suspicious eye ran over the document that was handed to him, although he knew very well that in his new profession nobody would ask to see a testimonial. And since the thought of his work in the theatre obsessed him, even as he was striding over the brown linoleum of the corridor towards the staircase he no longer remarked the quiet orderliness of the building, nor speculated about the woman’s name on the door he passed by, nor saw even the notice-board marked “Counting House”; the very pomp of the board-room and the Chairman’s private office in the front part of the main building meant nothing to him. Only when he was out in the street did he cast a glance back, a farewell glance, as he said to himself, and was vaguely disappointed because there was no equipage waiting at the main entrance. He would really have liked to set eyes on Bertrand for once. Of course, like Nentwig, the man kept himself well out of the way. And of course it would be better not to see him, not to set eyes on him at all, or on Mannheim for that matter and all that it stood for. Good-bye for ever, said Esch; yet he was incapable of departing so quickly and found himself lingering and blinking in the midday sunlight that streamed evenly over the asphalt of the new street, lingering and waiting for the glass doors to turn noiselessly on their hinges, perhaps, and let the Chairman out. But even though in the shimmering light it looked as if the two wings of the door were trembling, so that one was reminded of the swing doors behind Mother Hentjen’s buffet, yet that was only a so-called optical illusion and the two halves of the door were immobile in their marble framework. They did not open and no one came out. Esch felt insulted: there he had to stand in the glaring sun simply because the Central Rhine Shipping Company had established itself in a flashy new asphalt road instead of a cool and cellar-like street; he turned round, crossed the street with long, rather awkward strides, rounded the next corner, and as he swung himself on to the footboard of a tram that rattled past, he had finally decided to leave Mannheim the very next day

and go to Cologne to start negotiations with Oppenheimer, the theatrical agent.

II

It was natural that Esch should be annoyed because Mother Hentjen had never answered his letter, since even business letters were always answered within a certain time, and a private letter deserved more consideration, not being a mere matter of business routine. Still, Mother Hentjen's silence was in keeping with her character. It was common knowledge that a man needed only snatch at her hand, or try to pinch her on the more protuberant parts of her body, to make her stiffen into that rigidity of disgust with which she silently checked the importunate; perhaps Esch's letter had provoked a similar reaction in her. After all, a letter is something the writer's fingers have dirtied, not unlike dirty body-linen, and Mother Hentjen might be depended on to see it in that light. She was quite different from other women; she was not the woman to walk into a man's room early in the morning before it had been tidied without showing embarrassment even if he was washing himself. She was no Erna: she would never have asked Esch to think of her sometimes and to write her nice, sentimental letters. Nor was she the woman to have an affair with a man like Korn, although she was a more earthly creature than Ilona. Of course, like Ilona, Mother Hentjen was something superior, only it seemed to Esch that on the earthly plane she had to maintain by artifice what Ilona had by nature. And if she was disgusted by his letter he could understand and approve her attitude; he had almost a yearning to be scolded by her: it seemed as if she were bound to know what he had been up to, and he could feel again the cold look with which she had always reproached him whenever he slept with Hede; not even that had she been willing to tolerate, and yet the girl was a member of her own establishment.

When he arrived in Cologne, however, and made it his first business to call on Mother Hentjen, Esch was received neither with the friendliness he had hoped for nor the reproach he had feared. She merely said: "Oh, there you are again, Herr Esch. I hope you're staying for some time," and he felt like an outsider, felt actually as if he were doomed for all eternity to vegetate forgotten in the Korn household. When Frau Hentjen did come to his table later she wounded him even more deeply by speaking only of Martin: "Yes, he's got what he was asking for, Herr Geyring"—she had warned him often enough. Esch answered in monosyllables; he had told her all he knew when he wrote. "Oh! I must thank you for your letter, too," said Frau Hentjen, and that was all. In spite of his disappointment he pulled out a parcel: "I've brought you a souvenir from Mannheim." It was a replica of the Schiller Memorial outside the Mannheim theatre, and Esch indicated the shelf from which the Eiffel Tower looked down with its black-white-and-red flag; it would perhaps go all right up there. And although he merely handed the thing over without further ado, Frau Hentjen accepted it with unexpected and genuine delight, for this was something she could show to her friends. "Oh no, I won't let anybody so much as look at it down here; it's too lovely for that; it's going upstairs into my parlour … but it isn't right of you, Herr Esch, to go to such expense for me." Her warmth put him in a good mood again, and he began to tell her about his life in Mannheim, not omitting to express certain edifying sentiments which, though really emanating from that fool Lohberg, would, he assumed, be acceptable to Mother Hentjen. With many interruptions, for she was often called to the buffet, he extolled to her the beauties of nature, especially of the Rhine, and said he was surprised that she stuck so closely to Cologne and never made an excursion to places so easily within her reach. "All very well for sweethearting couples," said Mother Hentjen contemptuously, and Esch answered respectfully that she could quite well go alone or with a woman friend. That sounded plausible and reassuring to Frau Hentjen, and she said that she might consider it some day. "Anyhow," she remarked, dismissing it for the present, "I knew the Rhine well enough when I was a girl." Hardly had she said this than she stiffened and stared over his head. Esch was not surprised, for he knew Mother Hentjen's sudden withdrawals. But there was a particular reason for her reserve on this occasion, a reason that Esch could not have surmised: it was the first time that Frau Hentjen had ever mentioned her private life to a customer, and she was so upset by the realization that she fled to the buffet to look in the glass and finger her sugar-loaf coiffure. She was angry with Esch because he had drawn confidences from her, and she did not return to his table although the Schiller Memorial was still standing there. She felt like telling him to take it away, especially as one or two of his friends had sat down beside him and were running it over with masculine eyes and masculine fingers. She fled still farther, into the kitchen, and Esch knew that he had unwittingly committed some blunder or other. But when she finally reappeared he rose and took the statuette to the buffet. She polished it clean with one of the glass-cloths. Esch, who remained standing because he did not know how to extricate himself, told her that in the theatre opposite the memorial the *première*—that was a word he had learned from Gernerth—the *première* of one of Schiller's plays had taken place. He himself had now various connections with the theatre, and if everything went well he would soon be able to get tickets for her. Really? He had connections with the theatre? Oh,

well, he had always been something of a wastrel. For Mother Hentjen connections with the theatre simply meant relations with the vulgar actresses, and she remarked, contemptuously and indifferently, that she could not bear the theatre, for there was nothing in it but love, love, and that bored her. Esch did not venture to contradict her, but while Frau Hentjen carried her present into safety upstairs he began talking to Hede, who had barely looked at him, being obviously offended because he had not thought it worth his while to send her a postcard too. Hede seemed thoroughly ill-humoured, and ill-humour seemed to pervade the whole restaurant, in which the automatic instrument, set a-going by a reckless client, was now grinding out its tunes. Hede rushed to the instrument to turn it off, since music at such a late hour was against the public regulations, and all the men laughed at the success of the prank. Through the half-open window a stray night breeze wandered in, and Esch, who had got a whiff of it, slipped outside into the mild freshness of the night, quickly, before Hede could return, quickly, before he could encounter Frau Hentjen again; for she might get out of him that he had thrown up his job with the Central Rhine Shipping: and she certainly wouldn't be talked into believing that the promotion of wrestling matches was a respectable occupation; she wouldn't believe in its prospects, but would be sure to make adverse malicious comments—perhaps with justice. Still, he had had enough for one night, and so he took himself off.

In the black, cellar-like streets there was a chill stench, as always in summer. Esch was vaguely content. The air and the dark walls were familiar and comforting; a man did not feel lonely. He almost wished that he might meet Nentwig. He would have enjoyed giving the man a good hiding. And it exhilarated Esch to feel that life often provided quite simple solutions. Yet it was a lottery in which winning numbers were rare, and so he would just have to stick to the scheme for promoting wrestling matches.

Oppenheimer, the theatrical agent, possessed neither an antechamber with cushioned chairs, nor a reception clerk with forms for visitors to fill up. That was only to be expected. But nobody likes an exchange for the worse, and Esch had nursed a vague hope of finding an establishment not unlike that of the Central Rhine Shipping translated into theatrical terms. Well, it wasn't like that at all. After he had climbed a narrow dark staircase to the mezzanine floor, found a door marked "Oppenheimer's Agency," and knocked at it without getting any response, he was forced simply to walk in unannounced. He found himself in a room where an iron washstand was standing filled with dirty water and pigeonholes of all kinds were cluttered up with waste-paper. On one wall hung a large calendar issued by an insurance company, on the other wall, framed and glazed, was a picture of a ship of the Hamburg-Amerika line, the *Kaiserin Augusta Viktoria*, painted in gay colours with a swarm of smaller craft around her, as she left the harbour and clove the foaming blue waves of the North Sea. Esch did not give himself time to inspect the ship closely, for he had come on business, and since shyness was not one of his characteristics he pushed, although with some hesitation, into a second room. There he found a writing-desk that, in contrast to the disorder prevailing elsewhere, had nothing whatever upon it, not even any trace of writing materials, but was splotched with ink, its brown wood scored and nicked with old grey notches and new yellow ones, and its green-baize cloth torn in many places. There was no other door. In this room too, however, there were notable wall-decorations fastened to the wallpaper with drawing-pins, a collection of photographs that kindled Esch's interest, for there were many ladies in tights or spangles, in seductive and alluring poses, and he gave a glance round to see if Ilona was amongst them. But he thought it more proper to withdraw and inquire of somebody where Herr Oppenheimer might be found. There was no house porter, and so he rang at several doors until he was told, with a contempt that included himself, that Oppenheimer's office hours were highly irregular. "You can wait about for him if you've nothing better to do," said a woman.

So that was that. It was unpleasant to be treated in that way, and if his new profession were to expose him to such contempt it was hardly encouraging. Still, it couldn't be helped, he had taken it on for Ilona's sake (and the thought gave him a thrill of warmth about the heart); it was in any case his new profession, and so Esch waited. Fine office habits this Herr Oppenheimer had contracted! Esch had to laugh; no, this was not a job in which testimonials were likely to be asked for. He stood before the house door gazing down the street, until at length an insignificant, small, fair-haired, rosy man came towards the house and went up the stairs. Esch followed him. It was Herr Oppenheimer. When Esch explained his business Herr Oppenheimer said: "Women wrestlers? I'll fix it up, I'll fix it up all right. But what does Gernerth need you for?" Yes, what did Gernerth need him for? Why was he here? What had brought him here at all? Now that he had given up his post in the Central Rhine Shipping Company his visit to Cologne was by no means the official journey he had projected. Why had he come to Cologne, then? Surely not because Cologne was a stage nearer the sea?

When an honest man emigrates to America his relations and friends stand on the quay and wave their handkerchiefs to him. The ship's band plays, *Must I then, must I then, leave my native Town*, and although one might regard this, in view of the frequency with which ships make the voyage, as a show of hypocrisy on

the part of the bandmaster, yet many of the listeners are moved. When the rope is once made fast to the tiny tug, when the ocean giant floats out on the dark, buoyant mirror of the sea, then fitful and forlorn over the water come faint gusts of more cheerful melodies with which the kindly bandmaster is trying to enliven the departing passengers. Then it becomes clear to many a man how dispersedly his fellows are scattered over the face of the sea and the earth, and how frail are the threads that bind them one to another. Thus, gliding out of the harbour into clearer waters, where the current of the river is no longer discernible and the fides of the sea actually seem to be setting backwards into the harbour, the great liner often swims in a cloud of invisible but tense anguish, so that many a spectator feels prompted to stop her. On she goes, past the ships that lie along the smoking, littered shores, rattling their cranes to and fro as they load and unload vague cargoes for vague destinations, past the littered shores that take on a dusty greenness towards the river-mouth and come to an end in scanty herbage, finally past the sand-dunes where the lighthouse comes into sight, on she goes, fettered like an outcast to her tiny escort, and on the ships and along the shores stand men who watch her go, raise their arms as if to stop her, yet summon up merely a half-hearted and awkward wave of the hand. Once she is out in the open sea and her hull is almost sunk below the horizon, so that her three funnels are barely visible, many a man peering out to sea from the coast asks himself if this ship is making for the harbour or forging her way into a loneliness that the longshoreman can never comprehend. And if he finds that she is heading for the land he is comforted, as though she were bringing home his sweetheart, or at least a long-expected letter that he had not known he was waiting for. Often in the light haze of that distant frontier two ships meet, and one can see them gliding past each other. There is a moment in which both the delicate silhouettes merge together and become one, a moment of subtle exaltation, until they softly separate again with a motion as quiet and soft as the distant haze in which they pair, and each one goes alone her own way. Sweet, never-to-be-fulfilled hope!

But the passenger out yonder on board the ship does not know that we have been anxious for him. He scarcely notices the undulating ribbon of the coast, and only when he vaguely divines the yellow ray of the lighthouse is he aware that there are those on land who are anxious for him and think of his danger. He does not understand the danger that in fact encompasses him, he is not conscious that a great mountain of water separates him from the sea-bottom that is the earth. Only the man who has an aim fears danger, for he is afraid of failure. But the passenger who walks on the smooth planks that run round the deck like a racing-track, and that are smoother than any path he has yet trod, the passenger on board ship has no aim, and can never complete his destiny; he is closed within himself. All his potentialities lie asleep. One who loves him can love him only for what he promises to be, for all that lies within him, not for what he will achieve or has achieved; he will never achieve it. So men on shore know nothing about love and mistake their fears for love. The sea-passenger, however, soon comes to this knowledge, and the threads that were spun from him to those on shore are broken before the coastline sinks out of sight. It is almost superfluous for the bandmaster to try enlivening melodies upon him, for the passenger is content to let his hand slide over the smooth brown polish of the railing and its glittering brass rings. The shining sea lies stretched before him; he is at peace. Mighty engines drive him on, and their humming shapes a path that leads nowhere. The eye of the passenger at sea is a different eye: it is the eye of an orphaned man that recognizes us no longer. He has forgotten what was once his daily task; he believes no longer in the correctness of addition sums, and if his way should take him past the telegraph operator's cabin and he should hear the ticking of the apparatus, he marvels maybe at the mechanism, but cannot convince himself that the operator is receiving messages from the land and sending messages to the land; indeed, if he were not a sober-minded man he might think that the operator was speaking to the cosmos. He loves the whales and the dolphins that play round the ship, and he has no fear of the icebergs. But if a distant coastline should come into sight he refuses to look at it and perhaps takes refuge in the belly of the ship until it has vanished again, for he knows that it is not love that awaits him there, not loose-footed freedom, but taut anxiety and the straight walls of his aim. For he who seeks love seeks the sea; he may perhaps speak of the land that lies beyond the sea, but he does not mean what he says, for he thinks of the voyage as endless, the voyage that nourishes in his lonely soul the hope of expanding and opening itself to receive that other who emerges free as air from the light haze and enters into him, that other whom he rightly recognizes as a potential, unborn immortal.

It is undeniable that none of these reflections occurred to Esch, although he remained obsessed by the thought of emigrating to America and taking the book-keepers of the Central Rhine Shipping Company as fellow-passengers. But whenever he came into Herr Oppenheimer's office he studied long and minutely the *Kaiserin Augusta Viktoria* as she clove the waves.

He had resumed his former life, occupied his old room, and often took his midday meal at Mother Hentjen's. He used his bicycle with zeal, but his daily routine took him now to Herr Oppenheimer's instead

of to Sternberg & Company. Frau Hentjen had acknowledged the change in his vocation with a look that, in spite of her detachment, showed a blend of something like contempt, dissatisfaction, and perhaps even a hint of scorn, and although Esch had to admit that her concern was justified—indeed, maybe because of it—he exerted himself in painting to her in rosy colours the prospects and advantages of his new profession. He partly succeeded. Though she turned a deaf ear to his bold accounts of the greatness on the threshold of which he was now standing, and which would spread not only to America but over all the continents of the world, yet the compound of glittering riches, artistic success and joyous travel with which he tried to dazzle her, this destiny which another was to achieve and not herself, this far-flung greatness aroused the envy of the woman who had loathed for fifteen years the sordid narrowness of her fate. She was filled, one might say, with a kind of malicious admiration, for while on the one hand she maintained obstinately that his ambitions were hollow and unattainable, on the other she surpassed him in fantastic invention, gave him high-sounding advice, and encouraged him to think that he might rise to become the Chief or, as he said, the Chairman, of the whole gang of artists, performers and managers. “First of all they must be brought under severe order and discipline,” he used to reply, “that’s what they need most.” Yes, he was convinced of that, and this profound contempt for artists was founded not merely on his distaste for Gernerth’s greasy notebook and Oppenheimer’s chaotic office, but coincided so closely with Mother Hentjen’s principles that in one such moment of admiring assent—a world-embracing principle often debouches into a domestic triviality—Frau Hentjen granted his request to entrust her bills and accounts to his proficient supervision: she granted it with a condescending smile, as if fully persuaded that her simple books were kept in the most sensible and model manner. But scarcely had Esch bent himself over the columns when Mother Hentjen cried that he needn’t put on such a superior air; she wasn’t by any means impressed by his smattering of book-keeping; he had much better turn his attention to the theatrical business, which needed looking after much more than hers. And she snatched the books from him.

Yes, the theatrical business! With the casualness of his profession Oppenheimer was accustomed to accept lightly the accidents of chance, and although the persistence of Esch left him defenceless, he laughed over this man who came every day on his bicycle and behaved as if he were a partner in the firm; but he put up with it on learning that Esch was bringing new capital into the wrestling scheme, and even swallowed the insults that Esch daily flung at the disorder in his office. They had jointly bargained with the proprietor of the Alhambra Theatre for its lease during June and July, and since Esch’s zeal for work had to be appeased, he was empowered to recruit the lady wrestlers.

Esch, experienced as he was in drinking dens, brothels and girls, was the very man for this job. He combed out all the establishments, and whenever he found likely girls who were willing to enter the lists, he wrote down their names and qualifications in a notebook which he had himself ruled and spaced, and in which he did not omit to enter after each name, in a special column headed by the business-like word “Observations,” his judgment on the capabilities of the candidates according to a rough-and-ready classification. He was especially partial to girls with foreign-sounding names and of foreign race, for it was to be an international wrestling tournament, and the only ones he excepted were the Hungarians. It was often good enough fun trying the girls’ muscles, and sometimes even their stalwart charms seduced him. None the less he did not really enjoy his task, and when he spoke of it to Mother Hentjen in a disparaging and casual manner he was quite sincere: he could no longer regard such an occupation as compatible with his dignity, and he much preferred to sit at Oppenheimer’s vacant desk or to inspect the Alhambra.

He often betook himself there, traversing the empty grey auditorium in which one’s steps echoed on the floor-boards, and crossing the teetering planks laid over the well of the orchestra up to the stage, whose gigantic, naked grey walls were almost too overpowering for the flimsy screens of the wings that would soon cover them. When he measured the stage with long strides it was as if in triumph because no more knives were to be hurled across it, and when he peeped into the managerial office it was to wonder whether he couldn’t already install himself there. He reflected, too, that he must show Frau Hentjen round his new kingdom. The air was oddly grey and cool, although the beer-garden outside was glowing in the heat of the bright sun, and this self-contained kingdom of dusty strangeness was like a remote island of the unknown within a world of familiar things, it was a promise and an indication of all the strange potentialities that lay in wait across the great grey sea. In the evening, too, he often repaired to the Alhambra. But then the beer-garden was illuminated, and a band played on the wooden platform under the trees. The theatre lurked dark and almost unnoticed behind the lights, filled to the very roof with darkness, and one could not imagine how spacious and well arranged it was. Esch liked coming at such a late hour, for he found it pleasant to think that it was reserved for him and for no other to reawaken the life within that dark building.

When Esch visited the Alhambra again on one of the following mornings he found the proprietor playing

cards with friends at the bar. He joined them and they played until late in the afternoon. By that time Esch felt his face vacant and wooden, and was aware that the life he was leading exactly resembled that in the Mannheim warehouses during the strike. It only needed Korn to come along and boast about Ilona's love-making. What was the sense of his having given up his job in the Central Rhine Shipping? Here he was frittering away his time in idleness, using up his money, and he had not even avenged Martin. If he had stayed in Mannheim he could at least have visited Martin in jail.

At supper he accused himself of having deserted Martin shamefully, but when Frau Hentjen replied that every man must look out for himself, and that Herr Geyring, who had been warned often enough by her, could not expect a friend of his to stay in Mannheim for his sake and give up a brilliant career, he flew into a rage and abused her so vehemently that she took refuge behind the buffet and fingered at her hair. He paid his bill on the spot and left the restaurant, infuriated because she had extolled his idleness as a brilliant career. He did not, however, admit to himself that that was the cause of his anger, but merely denounced her for cold heartlessness towards Martin, and he spent the whole night in brooding over ways and means of helping Martin.

Early in the morning he betook himself to Oppenheimer's office. He had procured writing materials for himself and spent the whole morning in composing a savage article in which he made it clear that that deserving union secretary, Martin Geyring, had fallen a victim to a diabolical intrigue between the Central Rhine Shipping Company and the Mannheim police. This article he carried forthwith to the editorial office of the Social Democratic *People's Guardian*,

The building in which *The People's Guardian* had its headquarters was no palace of journalism. Not a single marble vestibule or wrought-iron gate. In general it was not unlike Oppenheimer's office, only that it was much busier; but on Sundays, when the newspaper world was on holiday, it would be the exact double of his. The black iron railings of the staircase were sticky to the touch, the peeling, shabby walls bore the traces of frequent pictorial activity, and from a window one looked out on a small courtyard in which stood a dray loaded with rolls of paper. Printing machines were at work somewhere with asthmatic rattlings. One entered the editorial office through a door that had once been white and banged ruthlessly because its lock did not fit. Instead of an insurance calendar there was a timetable on the wall, instead of dancers' portraits a photograph of Karl Marx. Nothing else was different, and his incursion here seemed all at once so wholly superfluous that even his article, which had sounded powerful and sinister, suddenly appeared lame and superfluous too. The same crew everywhere, thought Esch with fury. The same crew of demagogues, living everywhere in the same disorder. It was a waste of time to put a weapon into the hand of any of them. In their hands it would droop ineffectually, for not one of them knew the ins and outs of anything.

He was directed to a second room. Behind a table that might have once been covered with cloth sat a man in a brown-velvet jacket. Esch gave him the manuscript. The editor skimmed it over hastily, folded it, and laid it in a basket beside him. "But you haven't read it," said Esch sharply. "Oh yes, I know what it's about … the Mannheim strike; we'll see if we can use it." Esch was amazed at the man's lack of curiosity about the article, and at his assumption that he knew all about it already. "Excuse me, these are facts that put the strike in an entirely new light," he insisted. The editor picked up the manuscript, but laid it down again immediately. "What facts? I saw nothing new in it." Esch felt that the other was trying to display his omniscience. "But I was an eyewitness; I was at the meeting!" "Well, our confidential agents were there too." "Have you made it public, then?" "As far as I know there was nothing special to make public." Esch was so astounded that he simply sat down on a chair, although he had not been asked to do so. "My dear comrade," the editor went on, "after all you can't expect us to wait until you choose to pitch in your report." "Yes, but," Esch was completely bewildered, "but why haven't you done something, then? Why do you let Martin," he corrected himself, "why do you let Geyring sit in jail though he's innocent?" "Oh, that's it? … all honour to your sense of justice," the editor glanced at the manuscript which bore Esch's name, "Herr Esch, … but do you really think we could get him out as easily as that?" He laughed. Esch was not to be put off with laughter: "It's the other side that should be in the lock-up … that was more than evident to anyone who was there!" "So you think that we should have the directors of the Central Rhine Shipping jailed instead of Geyring?" What a nasty laugh, thought Esch, and remained silent. Have Bertrand locked up? Why not Bertrand as well as Nentwig? After all, in the sober light of day there wasn't such an enormous difference between the chairman of a company and a Nentwig, except that the Mannheim chairman was something better than Nentwig, and the lock-up wouldn't be good enough for him. Absently he repeated: "Have Bertrand locked up." The editor laughed more than ever. "That would just about put the lid on it." "And why?" asked Esch with irritation. "He's a decent chap, friendly and sociable," explained the editor amiably, "a first-class man of business, the kind of man one can get on with." "So you can get on with a man who's hand in glove with the police?" "Heavens above, of course the employers work with the police; if we were on top we'd do exactly the same." "And you call that justice?" said Esch indignantly. The editor

raised his hands in amused resignation. “How can we help it? That’s how justice is organized in the Capitalist State. Meanwhile a man who takes the trouble to keep his concerns going is of more use to us than one who simply shuts up shop. If you got your way and all the employers who are against us were put in jail we’d have an industrial crisis, and we’d get a lot of credit for that, wouldn’t we?” Esch repeated with obstinate anger: “All the same, he should be locked up.” The editor’s mirth became more and more irritating. “Ah, now I see what you’re getting at: you mean because he’s a sodomite?…” Esch pricked up his ears, the editor became still more genial, “that bothers you, does it? Well, I can set your mind at rest on that point: he only does it down in Italy. And anyhow a gentleman like him isn’t so easily nabbed as a Social Democrat.” So that was it: cushioned chairs, silver lackeys, equipages, and a sodomite, and Nentwig could run about and do what he liked! Esch stared the mirthful editor in the face: “But Martin’s locked up!” The editor had laid down his pencil and opened his arms a little: “My dear friend and comrade, neither of us can alter events. The strike in Mannheim was sheer stupidity, and the only thing we could do was to let things take their course and pocket our discomfiture. We can only be glad that Geyring’s three months is good propaganda material for us. Many thanks for your article, my dear fellow, and if you ever have something else for us bring it sooner next time.” He shook Esch by the hand, and Esch, in spite of his resentment, achieved an awkward bow.

June was approaching. Esch did Oppenheimer’s errands to the printers and the poster-designers; everything was ready, and bold advertisements on pillars and hoardings informed the town that the strongest women of all the nations would be assembled in Cologne to try their strength; and the list of names appended would have convinced any sceptic: there was Tatiana Leonoff, the Russian champion, Maud Ferguson, winner of the New York Championship, Mirzl Oberleitner, holder of the Viennese Cup, to say nothing of the German representative, Irmentraud Kroff. The names for the most part were fanciful inventions of Oppenheimer, who found the girls’ real names too tame and insipid. Esch had vainly striven against this piece of deception; had he taken all the trouble to find genuinely international girls simply for a Jew to mess about with their names? He took it as a fresh symptom of the anarchical condition of the world, in which no one seemed to know whether he was on the right or on the left, in the van or in the rear, and where it was ultimately of no importance whether Herr Oppenheimer called a person by this name or that; one had even to be thankful that Oppenheimer hadn’t thought of a Hungarian name. Hungary had no business to exist, anyway, and it was equally unseemly for Oppenheimer to have included Italy in the list of competing nations. Was it so certain that there were women there at all? Italy seemed to be a haunt of sodomites. Still, he was not displeased as he regarded the placard with all its international names: the different countries stood shoulder to shoulder, and that whole world was in a sense his own creation, an earnest and a promise for his future career. He brought one of his posters into Mother Hentjen’s and without asking permission pinned it up on the wooden panelling beneath the Eiffel Tower.

Frau Hentjen, however, was still resentful of the way he had abused her on Geyring’s account, and she called out from the buffet that he would kindly stick up his posters only where he was asked to; it was for her to decide that kind of thing. Esch, who had long forgotten the incident, and was only reminded of it whenever he saw her angry face, made as if to obey her order. This submissiveness disarmed Mother Hentjen; she came from behind the buffet, still scolding, to have a look at the poster. As she deciphered the list of names she was overcome by sympathy and disgust: these females deserved the degradation of exposing themselves before the eyes of objectionable men, but she was at the same time sorry for them. Esch, who had engineered the whole thing, stood revealed as a pasha in the middle of a harem, and this seemed a situation of such surpassing wickedness, of such deep debauchery, that by comparison with the rest of her customers who sat around with their contemptible little lusts and vices Esch was raised to a different plane, even a higher one. His short, stiff hair, his dark head, his tanned, ruddy skin, pah! he gave her the creeps; no, she did not understand why she put up with the man and his posters, and she started when he grasped her by the wrist. Did it not look as if he meant to overpower her and have her at his mercy and add her name to the list on the poster? She was almost disappointed when nothing happened, except that Esch guided her obediently outstretched finger from one name to the other: “Russia, Germany, United States of America, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Bohemia,” he read out aloud, and because it sounded grand, and not at all dangerous, Frau Hentjen recovered her composure. She said: “But there’s some missed out; for instance, Luxemburg and Switzerland.” None the less she presently turned away from the poster with the list of feminine names as though it had an evil smell: “How can you mix yourself up with all these women!” Esch replied by quoting Martin, that every man must stay where God had put him, adding that anyhow it was Teltscher’s business, not his, to deal with the women; he was concerned only with the administrative side.

Teltscher came to Cologne and inspected Esch’s recruits in Oppenheimer’s office. He sat the whole

morning in judgment, dismissed some of them outright, and appointed the others to meet him in the Alhambra for a first lesson and a trial of their abilities.

It turned out to be a jolly entertainment. Teltscher had brought the tights with him, and after Esch had called the roll from his notebook Herr Teltini invited the ladies to enter the dressing-room and get into their tights. Most of them refused to go until they had seen the others first in that unusual costume. When the pioneers, stripped and highly embarrassed, emerged from the dressing-room, there was a general outburst of laughter. The doors leading into the beer-garden were wide open; the green trees looked gaily in, and sudden wafts of air brought the warmth of the morning sun into the theatre. At the doors stood the proprietor and all the cooks from the restaurant, and Teltscher climbed up on the stage to give a demonstration, on the soft brown mat that was laid out, of the rules governing the Græco-Roman style of wrestling. Then he ordered up a couple to try it, but none of the girls would come; they giggled and nudged each other, pushing forward now one, now another, who resisted stoutly and took refuge in the crowd.

At long last two of them made up their minds to it; but when Teltscher proceeded to show them the preliminary holds they only laughed and let their arms hang and did not venture to touch each other. Teltscher ordered up a third girl, but when the same thing happened he made Esch call the roll again and attempted by jocose observations on each name to create a bold and enterprising atmosphere. A French name he hailed with praise of Gallic courage, and invited the “Pride of France” to step up; then he announced the “Polish Giantess”; in brief, he rehearsed all the honourable and inspiriting titles with which he intended to introduce the wrestlers to the public. Some of the girls now appeared on the stage, but others with shrieks of mirth called back that they weren’t having any and that they wanted to put on their clothes, which Teltscher countered with expressions of regret and a pantomime of comic despair. The whole thing was not to go off without an upset, however. When Esch called out the name of Ruzena Hrushka and Teltscher added: “Up with you, O Lioness of Bohemia,” a plump, soft creature, still dressed in her own clothes, pushed forward to the footlights and with the hard sing-song cadence of her race screamed that no one would laugh at her for dirty money. “I have throw away good money already because I not let no one laugh over me,” she screamed at Teltscher, and while he was still trying to think of a joke that would save the situation she lifted up her parasol as if to fling it at him. But then she fell silent, her soft round shoulders began to heave, and it could be seen that she was crying. When she turned round and went out between the silent ranks of startled girls her eye fell on Esch, who was sitting at a table with his lists. She bent over to him and spat out: “You, you are bad friend, bring me here to shame me.” Then she went out sobbing. Meanwhile Teltscher had got the situation in hand again, and the incident was not without its good effect; the girls, as if ashamed of their previous frivolity, showed themselves now ready for serious work. Teltscher heartened them with praise, and soon they had all forgotten the wild Czech woman. Even Esch dismissed her reproaches from his mind, although he could not but admit that he was a bad friend; yet in a little he would have Martin out of confinement. Such were his thoughts as he went home.

Frau Hentjen carefully blew her nose and regarded the result in her handkerchief. Perhaps from a feeling of guilt Esch had told her of the incident with the recalcitrant Czech woman, and Frau Hentjen had rated him, saying that it would have served him right if the poor, abused woman had scratched his eyes out. That was what came of degrading himself to the level of such women. Didn’t he have any proper pride? The trollop should have been glad he had given her a chance to earn a little money. Yes, that was all the thanks he got. But the Czech woman was quite right all the same; that’s how men should be treated. They deserved nothing better. To enjoy seeing a few poor drabs rolling over each other on the stage in tights! The poor things were ten times better than these men who took advantage of them. And she said cuttingly: “Put that cigar away for goodness’ sake.” Esch listened to all this respectfully, not merely because of the abundant dinner she gave him at a ridiculously low price, but also because he conceded her the right to show up his sinful way of life as it deserved. His affairs were in a bad state: of the three hundred marks that had been put aside for the wrestling project all he possessed now was a bare two hundred and fifty, and although his profits would begin to accumulate from the very first day’s takings, yet he did not know where he was heading for. He must have a settled source of livelihood if the sacrifice which he had taken on himself for Ilona’s sake, and which he had actually almost lost sight of by now, was not to come a cropper; he would have liked to talk the matter over but his vanity prevented him, for Mother Hentjen wasn’t in a mood to see that even the most splendid careers must grow out of humble beginnings. So he simply said: “Better wrestling matches than knife-throwing.” Frau Hentjen regarded the knife in Esch’s hand; she did not really understand what he meant, but she felt uncomfortable, so she replied briefly: “Perhaps.” “Nice meat,” said Esch, bending over his plate, and she replied with the dignity of the expert: “Sirloin.” “The grub poor Martin is getting now …” Frau Hentjen said: “Meat only on Sundays,” and she added with a hint of satisfaction, “and the rest of the time turnips mostly, I reckon.” For whose sake was Martin doomed to eat

turnips? For whom was he sacrificing himself? Did Martin himself know? Martin was a martyr and yet regarded his martyrdom simply as an occupation, partly pleasant, partly disagreeable; all the same he was a decent fellow. Frau Hentjen said: “If you won’t be led you must be driven.” Esch did not reply. Perhaps Martin was keeping something to himself which nobody else knew of; a martyr had always to suffer for some conviction, for an inward certainty that determined all his actions. Martyrs were decent people. Frau Hentjen declared: “That’s what comes of these anarchist papers.” Esch agreed. “Yes, they’re a set of swine, now they’ve left him in the lurch.” Martin himself, of course, had sneered at the Socialist papers, although one would have thought that it was their duty to represent the Socialist point of view and advance it. Had Martin really any Socialist convictions, or had he none at all? Esch was annoyed at the thought that Martin had kept something from him. A man who possessed the truth could redeem his fellowmen; that was what the Christian martyrs had done. And because he felt proud of his education he said: “In the times of the Romans there were wrestling matches too, but with lions. Blood all over the place. Over in Trier there’s a Roman circus still.” Frau Hentjen said with interest: “Well?” But when no answer came she continued: “And I suppose you want to introduce that next, eh?” Esch silently shook his head. If Martin sacrificed himself and lived on turnips neither for his convictions, nor for his better knowledge, nor for anything else, then he probably just did it for the sake of the sacrifice itself. Perhaps one had to sacrifice oneself first, so that—how had that idiot in Mannheim put it?—so that one might feel the power of redeeming grace. But in that case perhaps Ilona too needed the daggers for her act of sacrifice; who could make head or tail of it? And so Esch said: “I don’t want to do anything. Maybe all this wrestling business is pure idiocy.” Yes, said Mother Hentjen, that it was. And again he felt a sort of respectful esteem for Mother Hentjen which gave him a sense of security.

The room smelt of food and tobacco smoke and the sweetish odour of wine. Mother Hentjen was right: the women didn’t want things to be different. That was why Ilona had taken up with Korn. And if the wily cripple really did possess higher knowledge he didn’t give it away, allowed nobody else to share in it. He ran about, quite happy, like a dog on three legs, then whipped suddenly round a corner into prison, and prison made as little impression on him as a beating did on a dog. “Perhaps it even amuses them to be beaten and to sacrifice themselves,” he said absently. “Who?” asked Mother Hentjen with interest, “the women?” Esch reflected: “Yes, the lot of them.…” Mother Hentjen was pleased: “Shall I get you another slice?” She went to the kitchen. Esch was sorry for the Czech woman; she had cried so softly. But there too Mother Hentjen was probably right; the Hrushka woman herself did not want things to be different. And when Frau Hentjen returned with Esch’s plate he suddenly said: “No doubt she’s looking for a knife-thrower too, the Czech woman.” “Well!” said Mother Hentjen. “Poor devil,” continued Esch, and he himself did not know whether he meant Martin or the Czech woman. Mother Hentjen, however, took him to mean the Czech woman and retorted sarcastically: “Well, you can easily comfort her, seeing you’re so sorry for her … you’d better run away to her now.”

He made no reply: he had eaten well, and so he silently took up his newspaper and began to study the advertisement column, which had become to him the most important part of the paper since the announcement of the wrestling performances was to be found there. Yet the upright book-keeping of his soul demanded that for Frau Hentjen too an account should be opened; had she any less right to it, after all, than Ilona, who absolutely despised one’s efforts to do her good? His eye was arrested by an announcement of a wine auction at Saint-Goar, and he asked Mother Hentjen where she bought her wine. She mentioned a wine-dealer in Cologne. Esch looked disdainful: “So you throw away your money on them! Why have you never asked me about it? I don’t say that every firm is as bad as the set of swindlers our fine Herr Nentwig works for, but I bet you pay pretty well through the nose.” She assumed a martyred expression: a weak woman fending for herself had to put up with lots of things. He suggested that he should go to Saint-Goar himself and buy wine for her. “Yes, and what about the expense?” she said. Esch became eager; the expense could easily be recouped in the price she charged, and if the quality was up to the mark the wine could be adulterated with a cheaper sort; he knew all about that. And besides he wasn’t thinking of the expense; an excursion up the Rhine—Lohberg’s idiotic twaddle about the joys of nature came into his mind—was always a pleasure, and she needn’t refund him his expenses until she found she had made a profit on the transaction. “And I suppose you’re going to take your Czech woman with you?” said Mother Hentjen suspiciously. The idea seemed to him not an unattractive one; yet he disavowed it loudly and indignantly; Mother Hentjen could see for herself by coming with him, why, she had said not so very long ago that she would like a day in the country—well, she could get both at the same time if she came with him, he added impatiently. She looked into his face, regarded his light-brown complexion, stiffened, and started back. “And who would look after the restaurant …? No, it would never do.”

Well, he wasn’t so keen on it as all that himself; besides, his finances wouldn’t stand a trip for two at present, so Esch said nothing further about it, and Mother Hentjen regained her confidence. She took up the

newspaper, saw with reassurance that the auction was not to take place for a fortnight still, and said that she would think it over. Yes, she could think it over, said Esch dryly, getting up. He must go to the Alhambra, where Teltscher was having a rehearsal. He chose the route past the restaurant where the Czech woman was employed. But he trod on the pedal of his bicycle and rode past.

Gernerth had now arrived in Cologne, and Esch went down daily to the docks to inquire after the stage properties, which had been sent by boat down the Rhine, his expert knowledge of shipping affairs fitting him for this duty and his need for something to do making him zealous. And though perhaps he really went there to gaze at the sheds and nurse his regret at having given notice so prematurely to the Central Rhine Shipping Company, and to let the sight of the bonded wine-stores remind him that Nentwig was still a bitter thorn in his flesh, yet he saw and experienced all this not without satisfaction, for it proved to him visibly that his sacrifice could stand comparison with Martin's. Also the fact that Ilona had not come to Cologne, but had remained with Korn, fitted into the scheme and gave it a sort of higher significance. Yet it must not be imagined that Esch had become a man glorying in his sufferings. Not at all! To himself he did not scruple to call Ilona a whore, and even a filthy whore, and Teltscher a pimp and a scoundrel. And if he had met that rascal Nentwig between the piled-up rows of wine-barrels he would just have let fly at him. Yet whenever in passing the long row of warehouses belonging to the Central Rhine Company he caught sight of that hated sign bearing the firm's name, then high above all the swarm of petty scoundrels rose the splendid form of a man greater than life-size, the figure of a man of such high standing, a man so remote and lofty that he was almost more than human, and yet it was the figure of an arch-scoundrel; unimaginable and menacing rose that image of Bertrand, the rascally Chairman of this company, the sodomite who had got Martin thrown into prison. And that magnified figure, in essence unimaginable, appeared to subsume those of the two lesser scoundrels, and sometimes it seemed to Esch as though one had only to strike down this Antichrist to destroy as well all the pettier rascals in the world.

Of course it was stupid to bother one's head over such matters, for one had worse troubles; it was bad enough, in all conscience, to be loafing about these docks without pay. A man without a proper means of livelihood deserved to be exterminated. Mother Hentjen herself would agree with that, and it was curiously pleasant to picture this eventuality to oneself. Yes, the best solution perhaps would be for a super-murderer like that to come along and just do one in. And as Esch strolled along the quay and encountered once more the sign of the Central Rhine Shipping Company Limited he said loudly and distinctly: "Either him or me."

Esch was looking down into the barge that had brought up the theatrical properties, and supervising the unloading of its cargo. He saw Teltscher approaching with his rosy-cheeked friend, Oppenheimer: they advanced, so to speak, by stages, for every now and then they stopped, sometimes one seizing the other in his eagerness by the lapel of his coat, and Esch asked himself what they could have found to discuss so urgently. When they were near enough he heard Teltscher: "And I tell you, Oppenheimer, this is no job for me—you wait, I'll send for Ilona yet, and if in half-a-year's time I don't put on my turn in New York you can cut off my head." Hoho, so Teltscher hadn't given up his claims on Ilona even yet? Well, he would sing a different tune when things had been put in order. And Esch no longer found any pleasure in the thought of death. He snarled at the two of them: what did they want here? did they fancy, perhaps, that he had never seen to a job like this in his life before? or maybe they thought that he wanted to pinch something? or perhaps the gentleman wished to supervise his work? Well, he regretted bitterly that he had ever got other people to put their money into this business, not to mention his own. Here he had been slaving for nothing almost a whole month for this risky affair, and had put his last cent into it, and why? because a certain Herr Teltscher, who was apparently now intending to bolt, had wheedled him into it. Full of rage he began unskilfully to mimic Herr Oppenheimer's Jewish intonations. "Why, he's an Anti-Semite!" said Herr Oppenheimer, and Teltscher prophesied that after the first report from the box-office the day after next the Transport Director's spirits would rise considerably. And because he himself felt in a good humour and wanted to tease Esch he walked round the conveyance on which the properties were being loaded and checked them carefully, then went up to the horses and offered them a few lumps of sugar from his pocket. Esch, angry and offended, had turned away from the Jews and was checking the packing-cases, but he regarded the two men with the tail of his eye and was astonished at Teltscher's amiability; yet he did not want to admit that it was genuine, and half expected that the horses would decline the gift with a shake of the head. But the horses, just like horses, took into their soft and friendly lips the sugar-lumps lying on Teltscher's flat palm, and Esch was annoyed; surely he himself might have thought of offering them a scrap of bread at least! But now that the work of loading was finished nothing remained for him but to give both the horses a sober clap on the crupper. Esch did so, and then, sitting on the packing-cases piled on the lorry, they all three drove into the town. Oppenheimer said good-bye at the Rhine Bridge; Teltscher and Esch drove on and got down at Mother Hentjen's.

Teltscher had been a few times in the restaurant and already put on the airs of an old and regular customer. Esch felt guilty at bringing such riff-raff to Mother Hentjen's place, instead of something better. He would have liked to fling the fellow off the lorry. A Judas like that to sit down in Martin's place, a lout who had no idea that there were better, more refined, more highly respectable men in the world; who had no idea that Martin had been struck down by the hand of a man who would think it beneath him even to spit on a mere knife-thrower! And this juggler, this pimp, gave himself the airs of a conqueror, as if Martin's seat belonged by rights to him. Conjurers' tricks; mere juggling with dead things, sterile labour full of lies and trickery.

They had arrived at Mother Hentjen's. Teltscher clambered down first from the lorry. Esch shouted after him: "Here! Who's to unload this stuff? Supervising and spying round, that suits you all right, but when it comes to real work you make yourself scarce." "I'm hungry," Teltscher retorted simply and pushed open the restaurant door. No use arguing with a Jew; Esch shrugged his shoulders and followed him. And to disclaim any responsibility for this sort of customer he said jestingly: "I've brought you a fine customer this time, Mother Hentjen, well, I couldn't find anything better at the moment." But suddenly everything seemed not to matter: Teltscher might sit in Martin's place, and Martin in Nentwig's; one could not make head or tail of it, and yet somewhere it was all as it should be. Somewhere it was not a matter merely involving human beings, for human beings were all the same and nothing was changed if one of them melted into another, or one of them sat in another's place—no, the world was not ordered according to good and evil men, but according to good and evil forces of some kind. He looked furiously at Teltscher, who was performing conjuring tricks with his knife and fork, and now announced that he would extract a knife from Mother Hentjen's bodice. She started back with a shriek, but already Teltscher was holding up the knife between his thumb and first finger: "Mother Hentjen, Mother Hentjen, fancy you carrying things like that about in your bodice!" Then he proposed to hypnotize her and she became petrified at the mere suggestion. That was past the limit, and Esch let fly at Teltscher: "You should be locked up." "That's a new trick," said Teltscher. Esch growled: "Hypnotism is against the law." "An interesting chap," said Teltscher, jerking his chin towards Esch, and by this gesture inviting Frau Hentjen also to find the interesting chap a source of amusement; but she was still petrified with fear and mechanically fingered her coiffure. Esch silently digested the success of his intervention to rescue Mother Hentjen, and was satisfied. Yes, he had let one of them go, that man Nentwig, but it wouldn't happen a second time; even if it wasn't a matter of the individual, and even if people melted into one another, so that one fellow couldn't be told from the next; the wrong done existed apart from the doer, and it was the wrong alone that had to be expiated.

When later he accompanied Teltscher to the Alhambra he felt light-hearted. He had acquired a new kind of knowledge. And he almost felt sorry for Teltscher. And also for Bertrand. And even for Nentwig.

He had now managed at last to extort from Gernerth a guarantee of a hundred marks a month from the receipts in consideration of his collaboration—what would he have had to live on otherwise?—but the very first evening brought him in no less than seven marks. If that continued his revenue for the month would be doubled. Frau Hentjen had steadfastly refused to attend the opening performance, and next day at lunch-time Esch told her excitedly of its success. When he reached the most interesting, one might almost say the crucial, point of his narrative, and told how Teltscher had ripped up one of the girls' tights and only loosely tacked it together again, so that during the wrestling it could not help bursting at a certain prominent protuberance, and went on to say that this incident would be repeated evening after evening; while at the very memory of it he still found himself so overcome by laughter that repeatedly he had to help out his words with dumb show, suddenly Frau Hentjen got up and said she had had enough. It was scandalous that a man whom she had taken to be a decent fellow, a man who once had followed a respectable occupation, should sink so low. She withdrew into the kitchen.

Quite taken aback, Esch remained where he was and dried his eyes, still wet with laughter. In one corner of his heart he had a feeling of guilt, and in that corner he admitted that Mother Hentjen was right; the bursting tights on the stage were vaguely akin to the knives which no longer ought to be thrown there; yet Mother Hentjen certainly did not have the faintest suspicion of this, and her anger was really incomprehensible. He had a feeling of respect for her, he had no wish to swear at her as he did at that fool Lohberg, yet she would certainly have got on better with Lohberg, for as a matter of fact he wasn't so refined as Lohberg. He contemplated the portrait of Herr Hentjen over the mantelpiece to see whether it had any resemblance to Lohberg, and when he had looked long enough at the features of the late restaurant-keeper they did actually melt into those of the Mannheim tobacconist. Yes, wherever one looked it seemed that one figure melted into another and that one could not even distinguish the living from the dead. Nobody was what he thought he was; a man imagined he was a chap with his feet planted firmly on the earth, pocketing his seven marks a night and going wherever he pleased; and in reality he was just

sometimes in one place, and sometimes in another, and even when he made a sacrifice it was not himself who made it. An irresistible desire overcame him to produce some proof that this was not so and that it could not be so, and even if it was impossible to prove it to anybody else he was resolved to show that woman in there that he wasn't to be confused either with Herr Lohberg or with Herr Hentjen. Without further ado he went through to the kitchen and said to Frau Hentjen that she mustn't forget the wine auction at Saint-Goar next Friday. "You'll get plenty to keep you company without me," responded Frau Hentjen from the hearth. Her opposition exasperated him. What did this woman want from him? Must he only say things to her that she herself prescribed and wanted to hear? He could not help thinking of the orchestrion, which anybody could set going. And yet she couldn't stand the orchestrion. If the kitchenmaid hadn't been there, for two pins he would simply have fallen on her as she stood there by the hearth, to convince her of his existence. So he simply said: "I've arranged everything; we take the train to Bacharach, then the steamer to Saint-Goar. We'll arrive there about eleven o'clock in time for the auction. In the afternoon we can walk up to the Lorelei." She stiffened a little under the firmness of his decision, yet she tried to give her reply a mocking inflection: "Great plans, Herr Esch." Esch was now sure of himself. "Only a beginning, Mother Hentjen: by the end of next week I expect to have made a hundred marks." Whistling to himself he left the kitchen.

In the restaurant he looked again through the newspapers he had brought with him and marked in red pencil the notices of the opening performance. When he found no word of it in *The People's Guardian* he felt irritated. Yes, they could let a comrade and friend of theirs who had sacrificed himself lie in prison. But they couldn't put in a measly little report of the wrestling performance. Here, too, things must be set in order. He felt within him the strength required for it and the faith that he would succeed in mastering and resolving the chaos in which everything was so painfully entangled, in which friend and foe, sullen and yet resigned, were so inextricably involved.

As he was walking through the theatre during the interval he suddenly caught sight of Nentwig, and he started so violently that it brought to his mind a phrase, "struck to the heart." Nentwig was sitting with four other men at a table, and one of the wrestlers, a bath-robe flung over her tights, was sitting with them. The bath-robe gaped and Nentwig was occupied in widening the opening by adroit movements of his pudgy hands. Esch walked past with his head averted, but the girl called out to him, so that he had to turn round. "Hallo, Herr Esch, what are you doing here?" he heard Nentwig's voice. Esch hesitated: then he said briefly: " 'Evening." Nentwig did not feel the rebuff, but lifted his glass to him, while the girl said: "You can have my chair, Herr Esch. I must go back to the stage now." Nentwig, who had been drinking, held Esch's hand firmly clasped, and while he poured out a glass of wine for him looked up at him with a sentimental, vinous gaze. "No, fancy meeting like this, it's quite an unexpected pleasure." Esch said that he too was needed on the stage, and Nentwig, still holding his hand, gurgled with laughter: "Aha! going to see the ladies behind the scenes. I'll come too, I'll come too." Esch tried to make Nentwig understand that he was here on business. At last Nentwig grasped it: "Oh? So you're employed here? A good post?" Esch's vanity would not allow him to admit this. No, he wasn't employed here; he was a partner in the concern. "Think of that, think of that," said Nentwig in astonishment; "a good business, a nice little business, obviously a nice little business"—he looked round at the well-packed hall—"and he forgets his good old friend Nentwig, who would always be glad to share in a thing like that." He became quite alert: "Who caters for the wine, Esch?" Esch explained that he had nothing to do with the catering; the proprietor looked after that. "Hm, but all the rest"—Nentwig made a grand comprehensive gesture embracing the hall and the stage—"you're concerned in all that? Come, drink a glass of wine anyway," and Esch could not avoid clinking glasses with Nentwig, and must shake hands with Nentwig's companions too, and drink to them. In spite of the cunning with which Nentwig had cornered him he could not summon up the hate he ought to have felt against Nentwig. He tried to bring to his mind again the sins of the head clerk; he did not succeed; there had been something fishy in the balance sheet, something very fishy, and Esch sat up a little straighter so as to keep his eye on the one policeman in the hall. But Nentwig's guilt had grown so strangely shadowy and contourless that Esch became aware at once of the senselessness of his intentions, and somewhat awkwardly and a little ashamed of himself he put out his hand for his wine-glass. Meanwhile Nentwig gazed with swimming eyes at his good old book-keeper, and it seemed to Esch as if along with those swimming eyes the whole plump form of Nentwig was dissolving into indeterminacy. This vinegar faker had treacherously accused him of erroneous book-keeping, had tried to deprive him of his livelihood and his existence, and would always go on conspiring against him. Yet one could hardly feel angry with him now. From the inextricable coil of happenings an arm projected, an arm with a threatening dagger in its hand, but if one were to discover that it was Nentwig's arm the whole thing would turn into a stupid and almost sordid episode. Death dealt by the hand of a Nentwig could scarcely even be called murder, and a sentence

pronounced over Nentwig would be nothing but the shabbiest form of revenge for a mistake in book-keeping that was not a mistake at all. No, there was little point in handing over a head clerk to justice, for it was not a matter of striking down a hand, even if that hand held the threatening dagger, it was a matter of striking a blow at the whole thing, or at least at the head of the offence. Something inside Esch told him: "A man who sacrifices himself must be decent," and he decided to take no further notice of Nentwig. The fat little man had again sunk back into his drunken doze, and when the strains of *The Gladiators' March* began, to which the wrestlers, under Teltscher's direction, now came marching on to the stage, Nentwig did not notice that Esch had disappeared.

When Esch walked into the manager's office Gernerth was sitting with a glass of beer before him and lamenting: "A fine life this, a fine life!… " Oppenheimer was toddling up and down wagging his head, indeed his whole body wagged: "Can't see what there is to upset you so much." Gernerth's notebook was lying before him: "The taxes simply eat everything up. Why are we toiling and slaving here? To pay the taxes!" They could hear the resounding smack of sweating women's bodies coming to grips on the stage, and Esch felt indignant that this man sitting here should talk of toiling and slaving, merely because he was making calculations in a notebook. Gernerth went on with his lament: "The children must go away for a holiday; that costs money … where am I to get it?" Herr Oppenheimer evinced sympathy: "Children are a blessing and children are a trial; don't you worry too much, it'll come all right." Esch felt sorry for Gernerth, a good fellow, Gernerth; all the same the affairs of the world became confused again when you reflected that out there on the stage a pair of tights must presently burst so that Gernerth's children might go away for a holiday. Somewhere or other there was cause for Mother Hentjen's disgust at the whole business, though not where she imagined it to be. Esch himself could not tell where it lay; perhaps it was simply the muddle and confusion that filled him with disgust and rage. He went out; in the wings some of the wrestlers were standing about, their bodies smelling of sweat; to clear a passage for himself Esch seized them from behind by the thick arms or by the breasts, hugging them tightly, until one or two began to laugh wantonly. Then he stepped on to the stage and took his place as clerk at the so-called jury bench. Teltscher, the referee's whistle between his teeth, was lying on the floor peering sharply under the arched body of one girl, who was resisting the efforts of another to flatten her out, efforts ostensibly great, but only ostensibly, of course, for the girl underneath was the German representative who was bound to free herself forthwith by a patriotic upward heave from ignominious captivity. And although Esch knew by heart this prearranged farce he experienced a feeling of relief when the almost beaten wrestler got on to her feet again: and yet he was filled with indignant pity for her opponent when Irmentraud Kroff now sprang upon her and, amid the patriotic acclamations of the audience, pressed the shoulders of the enemy against the mat.

When Frau Hentjen got up the dawn was just breaking. She opened the window to see how the day promised. The sky arched clear and cloudless over the dark, grey yard, which lay below her in motionless silence, a little rectangle within dark walls. The clean washtubs from last washing day were still standing down there. A cool wind, imprisoned between the walls, smelt of the city. She trailed up to the kitchenmaid's room and knocked at the door; she didn't intend to leave without her breakfast; on the top of everything else that would be the last straw. Then she carefully began her toilet and drew on the brown-silk dress. When Esch called for her she was sitting morosely at her morning coffee in the restaurant. She said morosely: "Let's go," but at the house door it occurred to her that Esch too might want some coffee; it was got for him hastily in the kitchen, and he drank it standing. The sun was already up, but the bright strips of sunshine that lay on the cobbles between the long shadows of the house walls did not improve the temper of either. Esch merely announced curtly and abruptly: "I'll get the tickets," and then: "Platform five." In the carriage they sat side by side in silence; but when they reached Bonn he leaned out, inquired whether there were any fresh rolls to be had, and bought her one. She ate it morosely and resentfully. After Coblenz, when the passengers as usual crowded to the window to admire the Rhineland scenery, Frau Hentjen too felt moved to follow their example. But Esch did not budge from his place; he knew the neighbourhood so well that he was sick of it, and besides he had not proposed to indicate the beauties of nature to Frau Hentjen until they were on the steamer. Now he felt annoyed at her for anticipating this pleasure and for listening to the edifying explanations of the other people in the compartment. So every tunnel that interrupted the view was a salve to his ill humour, and his irritation mounted so high that at Ober-Wesel he peremptorily called her away from the window: "I had a job myself once in Ober-Wesel." Frau Hentjen looked out; there was nothing of interest to be seen in the station. She replied politely: "Yes, you've been in lots of places." Esch was not yet finished: "A wretched job it was, I stuck it out all the same for a few months on account of a girl in the place … Hulda, her name was." Then he could just get out and look for her, was Frau Hentjen's furious rejoinder, he needn't trouble himself on her account. But presently they arrived at Bacharach, and

for the first time in his life Esch experienced the helpless feeling which descends on the pleasure-tripper who, standing in a railway station, has a vacant hour in front of him. According to his programme they should have had a lunch on the boat, but simply to cover his embarrassment he now suggested that they should go to a restaurant that he knew. But as they were walking through the narrow streets of the town which lay so quiet and peaceful in the clear morning light, suddenly in front of one of the timbered houses Mother Hentjen exclaimed: “That’s where I would like to live, that would be my ideal.” Perhaps it was the flowers in the window-boxes that touched her, perhaps it was simply the feeling of release that often comes over people when they are on unfamiliar ground, or perhaps her bad temper had simply exhausted itself—in any case the world had become brighter; at peace with each other they gazed at everything, climbed up as far as the ruins of the church, of which they could not make very much, hurried too soon to the landing-stage for fear of missing the boat, and did not mind in the least when they found that they must wait for half-an-hour.

On the boat, it is true, they quarrelled more than once, for Frau Hentjen’s pride could not endure for long that Esch alone should know the neighbourhood. She racked her memory for names of well-known places, began in her turn to make conjectures and to provide information, and was deeply insulted when he scrupulously refused to let any error pass. Yet even this could not cloud their good humour, and, arrived at Saint-Goar, they were sorry they had to leave the boat, indeed for a moment they could not think why they were landing at all. The business aspect of their journey had become in some way indifferent, and when at the auction-rooms they learned that the sale of the cheap wines was already finished it did not disturb them, but was almost like a deliverance from an obligation, for it seemed far more important to them that they should be in time for the next journey of the ferry-boat, which with outstretched sail was making for the sunny and alluring shores of Goarshausen on the other bank. And when Esch, aping the precision of a methodical business man, noted the prices the wines had reached at the auction “for future reference,” as he said, this affectation of commercial zeal was a sham and gave him a queer kind of bad conscience which made him diligently ignore the more favourable prices, and yet on the other hand depressed him so acutely that when he was sitting in the ferry-boat he suddenly entered the missing prices in his list from memory, meanwhile regarding Frau Hentjen with a hostile glare.

Frau Hentjen sat on the sun-steeped wooden seat of the ferry-boat and contentedly dipped one finger into the water, very carefully, however, so as not to wet her cream-coloured lace mittens, and if she could have had her will she would simply have gone on sailing from one bank of the Rhine to the other, for the curiously light feeling of dizziness induced by the sight of water obliquely streaming past her was a pleasant one. But the day was already too far advanced, and it was pleasant enough under the trees in the inn garden on the bank of the river. They ate fish and drank wine, and smoking his cigar Esch revolved the question of establishing closer relations, earnestly considering whether Mother Hentjen, who sat there stout and magnificent, might not even expect it. Certainly she wasn’t like other women, and so he began very cautiously to speak about Lohberg, who had really moved him to take this lovely trip, and he began to praise Lohberg, so that from this exordium he might in decorous terms lead up to an exposition of the vegetarian view of true love; but Frau Hentjen, who saw with anxiety where he was heading, broke off the conversation, and although she herself felt tired, and would rather have rested in peace, she referred him to his programme, according to which they must now climb up to the Lorelei. Esch felt indignant; he had done his best to speak like Lohberg and without effect. Evidently he was not yet refined enough for her.

He got up and paid the bill. While they were passing through the inn garden he noticed the summer visitors; among them were pretty young women and girls; and suddenly Esch could not understand why he was attached to this elderly woman, stately as was her appearance in the brown-silk dress. The girls were in light, gay, summer dresses, and Mother Hentjen’s brown silk had become somewhat dusty and draggled on the roads. Nevertheless there seemed to be a certain amount of justice in it; one had a conscience, after all, and if one thought of Martin pining for the sun in his cell, after sacrificing himself for a base, ungrateful crowd, then one’s own lot, all things considered, was still a long way too fortunate! And while he ploughed through the dust of the main road with Frau Hentjen, instead of lying in the grass with one of those pretty girls, it actually seemed to him quite fair that this woman should not feel any gratitude for his sacrifice. A man who sacrificed himself must be decent. He considered whether he could inform her with propriety that it was a sacrifice, but then he remembered Lohberg and refrained: a man of refinement suffered in silence. Some time or other, perhaps when it was too late, she would be bound to realize it. A painful agitation overcame him, and walking in front he took off first his coat and then his waistcoat. Mother Hentjen regarded with repulsion the two large wet patches where his shirt stuck to his shoulder-blades, and when after turning into a wood-path he remained standing and she caught up on him, she suddenly smelt the warm odour of his body and started back in alarm. Esch said good-humouredly: “Well, what is it, Mother Hentjen?” “Put on your jacket,” she said severely, but she added in a maternal tone: “It’s cold here, quite

cold, you'll get a chill." "It's quite warm when you're walking," he replied, "you should let out a hook or two at the neck of your dress." She shook her head with the old-fashioned little hat perched on it; no, she wouldn't think of doing that, a fine sight she would be! "Well, there's nobody to see us here," said Esch, and this sudden open declaration that they were alone and together, in a seclusion in which they need not be ashamed before each other because nobody could see them, confused her. All at once she found it understandable that, as if in confidence, he should reveal his sweat to her; and if she still felt disgust she felt it no longer on the surface; it was dulled and muffled, as it were, hidden away; and even her fear of his strong white teeth now left her, and she accepted it as part of this strangely permitted and shameless freedom when he bared them laughingly again: "Forward, Mother Hentjen; it's no use saying you're tired." She felt offended that he should openly doubt whether she could keep up with him, and, a little short of breath, and supported on her fragile pink parasol, she again set herself in motion. Esch now remained by her side and at the steeper places attempted to assist her. She regarded him suspiciously at first, fearing a brazen approach to familiarity, and only after some hesitation finally took his arm, to relinquish this support immediately, however, indeed to push it away, as soon as she saw another traveller, or even a child, approaching.

They climbed slowly, and when with panting lungs they made a halt, gradually they became aware of the things round about them: the whitish clay of the wood-path cracked with the heat, the faded green plants sticking out of the dry soil, the roots which with their dusty fibres wandered over the narrow footpath, the dry, withered odour of the woods almost breathless under the heat, the shrubs among whose foliage hung black, lifeless berries, ready to shrivel at the touch of autumn. They took all this in, yet could not have described it, but presently they reached the first seat commanding a view and beheld the valley outspread before them, and although they were still a long way from the top of the Lorelei Rock it seemed to them, as they sank upon the seat, that they were already at their goal, from which they could drink in the scenery; and Frau Hentjen carefully smoothed out her dress so that her weight might not crease it. The air was so still that the sound of voices at the landing-stage and in the beer-gardens of Saint-Goar came over to them, as well as the drowsy, dull thud of the ferry-boat against the pier; and the unusualness of these impressions made them both a little uncomfortable. Frau Hentjen regarded the hearts and initials cut all over the bench and in a strained voice asked Esch whether he too had immortalized himself here with his Hulda from Ober-Wesel. When he jestingly began to look for his initials she told him he needn't bother: for whether in visible form or not, a man would always find his filthy past wherever he went. But Esch, who did not want to give up his jest, replied that maybe he might find her name too enclosed within a heart, and this made her really angry; what would he read next into people's words? thank God her past was pure and she could stand her ground with any young girl. Of course a man who all his life had been constantly running after loose women wouldn't understand that. And Esch, stricken to the heart by this accusation, felt common and despicable at having prized her less highly than the young girls in the inn garden, most of whom were probably unworthy to lace Mother Hentjen's shoes. And it did him good to know that here was a human being whose character was decided and unequivocal, a human being who knew her right hand from her left, who knew virtue from vice. For a moment he had the feeling that here was the longed-for rock, rising clear and steadfast out of the universal confusion, to which one might cling in security; but then the memory of Herr Hentjen and his portrait in the restaurant came to disturb him, and he could not get rid of the thought that somewhere a heart must be engraved that contained her initials and Herr Hentjen's lovingly interlaced. He did not trust himself to touch on this, however, but merely asked where her home had been originally. She replied curtly that she came from Westphalia; besides, that was nobody's business but her own. And as she could not reach her coiffure she patted her hat instead. No, and she couldn't stand people who stuck their noses into other people's affairs either, and it was only men like Esch, who were incapable of imagining that some people mightn't have a shady past, who would do that kind of thing. Wastrels, who when they couldn't have a woman for themselves did their best to fasten a past love affair on to her. In her indignation she shifted a little farther away from him, and Esch, whose thoughts were still circling round Herr Hentjen, was now certain that she must have been very unhappy. His face took on an expression of bitter sorrow. Quite possible that she had been driven into her marriage with kicks and blows. So he said that he hadn't intended his question to be offensive. And, accustomed to comfort by physical caresses women who cried or otherwise gave signs of being unhappy, he took her hand and fondled it. Perhaps it was the extraordinary stillness of everything round her, perhaps however it was only her exhaustion, but she offered no resistance. She had expressed her point of view, but her last words had fallen from her lips like a succession of meaningless sounds which she herself scarcely recognized, and now she felt quite empty, incapable even of feeling repulsion or disgust. She looked at the outspread valley without seeing it, and knew no longer where she was. All those mechanical years in which her life had been passed between the buffet in the restaurant and a few familiar streets shrank to a tiny point, and it seemed to her

that she had sat here for ever in this unfamiliar place. The world was so unfamiliar that it was impossible to grasp it, and nothing now connected her with it, nothing but the thin twig with the pointed leaves which hung over the back of the seat and which the fingers of her left hand occasionally touched. Esch asked himself whether he should kiss her, but he felt no desire to do so, and he reflected also that it would not be refined.

So they sat on in silence. The sun was declining in the west and shone on their faces, but Mother Hentjen did not feel its heat on her face, nor the smarting of her stiff, reddened, dust-covered skin. And it almost seemed as if this dreamlike, semi-conscious state were about to enclose Esch too and clasp him in its embrace, for although he saw the lengthening and broadening mountain shadows in the valley as an alluring promise of coolness he felt reluctant to move, and only with hesitation did he at last take up his waistcoat, one of whose pockets contained his great silver watch. It was time to go, and Frau Hentjen, now quite will-less, obeyed his command. While descending she rested heavily on his arm, and he carried the flimsy pink parasol over his shoulder; his waistcoat and jacket dangled from it. To ease the exertion of walking for her he undid two hooks on her high-necked dress, and Mother Hentjen submitted to it, nor did she push him away when other pedestrians approached; she did not see them. The skirt of her brown-silk dress trailed in the dust of the main road, and when in the station Esch deposited her on a seat while he went to quench his thirst she sat there helpless and will-less, waiting for him to return. He brought a glass of beer for her too, and she drank it at his bidding. In the dark compartment of the train he made a pillow for her head on his shoulder. He did not know whether she was asleep or awake, and she herself scarcely knew it. Her head rolled to and fro awkwardly on his hard shoulder. To his attempts to draw her to him her thick-set body in its casing of whalebone put up a stiff resistance, and the hatpins on her nodding head threatened his face. Impatient now, he pushed her hat back, which, sliding downwards along with her coiffure, gave her a drunken look. Her silk dress smelt of dust and heat; only now and then was one aware of the delicate lavender scent that still remained in the folds. Then he kissed her on the cheek as it slid past his mouth, and finally he took her round, heavy head in his hands and drew it to him. She responded to his kiss with dry, thick lips, somewhat like an animal which presses its muzzle against a window-pane.

Not until she was standing in the entrance hall did she find herself back in her world again. She gave Esch a push on the chest and with uncertain steps made her way to her place behind the buffet. There she sat down and stared out into the restaurant, which seemed to lie before her in a mist. At last she recognized Wrobek sitting at the nearest table and said: “Good-evening, Herr Wrobek.” But she did not see that Esch had followed her into the restaurant, nor did she notice that he was among the last to leave. When he shouted good-night to her she replied non-committally: “Good-evening, gentlemen.” Nevertheless as he stepped out of the restaurant Esch felt a strange and almost proud sensation: that of being Mother Hentjen’s lover.

III

When a man has once kissed a woman the train of consequences follows inevitably and unalterably. One can hasten or delay it, but one cannot escape a law of nature. Esch knew that. Yet his imagination balked at picturing the course of his relationship to Mother Hentjen, and so he was relieved to have Teltscher beside him when he entered the restaurant next day at noon; that made it easier for him to meet Mother Hentjen, and simplified everything.

Teltscher had hit upon a new idea; they should get hold of a negress for the wrestling; that would make the final rounds peculiarly attractive; she could be called the “Black Star of Africa,” and after two indecisive rounds would finally be beaten by the German. Esch was rather apprehensive that Teltscher would hold forth about this African scheme to Mother Hentjen, and he was not mistaken, for hardly was he inside the door before Teltscher paraded his new idea. “Frau Hentjen, our Esch is going to find a negress for us.” She did not at first understand, not even when Esch truthfully declared that he didn’t know where he was to get hold of a negress. No, Mother Hentjen simply refused to listen, taking refuge in biting sarcasm: “One woman more or less, that makes no difference to him.” Teltscher jovially smacked him on the knee: “Of course, a man like him has so many women running after him, there’s nobody that can put his nose out of joint.” Esch glanced up at Herr Hentjen’s portrait; there was a man who had put his nose out of joint. “Yes, that’s the kind of fellow Esch is,” repeated Teltscher. To Frau Hentjen this was a confirmation of her own judgment, and she sought to strengthen her alliance with Teltscher; she regarded the short bristles of Esch’s hair, which were like a stiff dark brush above the yellowish skin of his head, and she felt that to-day she needed an ally. Turning her back on Esch she praised up Teltscher: it was only to be expected that a man who thought something of himself should avoid meddling with these women and should rather hand the job over to a man like Esch. Esch retorted huffily that most men would fall over each other to get jobs of

that kind, but very few could handle them. And he despised Teltscher, who had not even managed to keep Ilona for himself. Still, she would soon be beyond anybody's reach. "Well, Herr Esch," said Frau Hentjen, "why don't you get on with it? Your negress is waiting; away you go." Very well, he would go, he returned, and as soon as he had eaten his dinner he got up and left the somewhat disconcerted Frau Hentjen to Teltscher's society.

He dawdled about for a while. He had nothing to do. It annoyed him that he had left Frau Hentjen alone with Teltscher, and finally he was driven to return. It was hardly likely that Teltscher was still there, but he wanted to make sure. The restaurant was empty, nor could he find anybody in the kitchen. So Teltscher had gone, and there was nothing to hinder him from also taking himself off; but he knew that at this hour Frau Hentjen usually stayed in her own room, and suddenly he realized that that was why he had come back. He hesitated a moment and then quietly mounted the wooden stairs. Without knocking he entered the room. Mother Hentjen was sitting by the window darning stockings; when she caught sight of him she uttered a faint shriek and stood petrified. He went straight up to her, pressed her down into her chair again and kissed her on the mouth. She twisted and turned her heavy body in her efforts to evade him, and gasped hoarsely: "Go away … you've no business here." More keenly than his violence she resented the fact that he had come into her room, he, fresh from the arms of a Czech or a negress, into her room that no man had yet entered. She was fighting for her room. But he held her firmly, and at length with thick, dry lips she began to return his kisses, perhaps only as a concession to persuade him to go, for between the kisses she kept repeating with set teeth: "You've no business here." Finally she implored merely: "Not here." Esch, weary of the grim struggle, remembered that this was a woman to be treated with consideration and respect. If she wanted to change the scene of action, why not? He let her go, and she urged him to the door. When they were in the lobby he said gruffly: "Where, then?" She did not understand, for she believed that he would go now. Esch, with his face close to hers, again asked: "Where, then?" And since she made no move and gave no answer he grasped her again to push her back into the room. She was aware only that she must defend that room. Helplessly she gazed round, saw the door leading into the parlour, had a sudden hope that the primness of the parlour would bring him back to his senses and to decent behaviour, and indicated the door with her eyes; he made way for her, but followed with his hand on her shoulder as if she were a captive.

When they were inside she said uncertainly: "There, now perhaps you'll be sensible, Herr Esch," and strained towards the window to fling back the shutters. But he had seized her from behind, and Frau Hentjen could not move from the spot. She tried to wrest herself free, but they swayed and stumbled among the nuts, so that they almost fell. The nuts cracked under their feet, and as Frau Hentjen, anxious to save her stores, struggled backwards towards the alcove in search of firm footing and something she could get a purchase on, she had a momentary flash of dreamlike awareness, as if she were walking in her sleep: was it not her own doing that the man was being enticed into that corner? But that thought only made her angrier, and she hissed: "Go to your negress … you can get round these sluts, but you won't get round me." She clawed at the corner of the alcove, but instead caught hold of the curtain; the wooden rings on the curtain-pole rattled slightly, and being afraid of damaging the good curtain she let go, so that Esch was able to force her into the dark corner where the twin beds stood. He was still behind her and had recaptured her hands and pulled them close to him so that she could not but feel his excitement. Whether for that reason or because the sight of the marriage beds reduced her to defenceless immobility, she went limp under his passionate aggression. And as he tore impatiently at her clothing, and she was afraid that now her underlinen would be damaged, she herself helped him as a criminal might help the hangman, and it filled him almost with horror to note how smoothly things now took their course and in what a matter-of-fact way Mother Hentjen, when they fell on to the bed, laid herself on her back to receive him. And it filled him with a horror still more profound to see her lying rigid and motionless, as if submitting to a familiar duty, as if she were merely recapitulating an old and familiar act of submission, without interest, without enjoyment. Only her round head rolled to and fro on the bedcover as if in persistent negation. He felt the warmth of her body and whipped up his own lust to provoke and overmaster hers. He clutched her head between his hands as if to squeeze out of it the thoughts that were congealed within it, refusing to flow out to him, and his mouth followed the unlovely lines of her heavy cheeks and her low forehead that remained motionless and unresponsive, as unresponsive as the masses for whom Martin had sacrificed himself and who were still unfree. Perhaps Ilona might have the same feeling about Korn's massive insensitivity, and for a moment he was glad to think that his sacrifice was the same as hers, and that it was right, and that it was done for her and for redemption into righteousness. Oh, to release oneself, to strip oneself more and more, to annihilate oneself with all the sin that one had accumulated and bore about, yet to release her too whose mouth one sought for, to annihilate Time that had her in its grip, Time that had embedded itself in these ageing cheeks; oh, the desire he had to annihilate the woman who had lived in Time, to bid her be born again timeless, motionless and perforce at one with him! His seeking mouth had found hers, that was now

pressed against his like the muzzle of an animal against a pane of glass, and Esch was enraged because she kept her soul tightly enclosed behind her set teeth so that he should not possess it. And when with a hoarse sound she opened her lips at last, he felt an ecstasy such as he had never yet experienced in a woman's arms, he flowed boundlessly into her, yearning to enter into possession of her who was no longer a woman to him but a re-won heritage wrested from the unknown, the matrix of life, annihilating his ego by transcending its confines till it was featureless and submerged in its own enlargement. For the man who wills Goodness and Righteousness wills thereby the Absolute, and it was revealed to Esch for the first time that the goal is not the appeasement of lust but an absolute oneness exalted far above its immediate, sordid and even trivial occasion, a conjoint trance, itself timeless and so annihilating time; and that the rebirth of man is as still and serene as the universal spirit that yet contracts and closes round man when once his ecstatic will has compelled it, until he attains his sole birthright: deliverance and redemption.

How little it mattered, after all, that one was Mother Hentjen's lover! There are many men who think that life is centred in the existence of some particular woman. Esch had always known how to keep himself free from that prejudice. Especially now, even although Frau Hentjen often strangely usurped his thoughts. Especially now. His life was directed to greater and higher aims.

Near the New Market he came to a standstill in front of a book-shop. His eye fell on a picture of the Statue of Liberty stamped in gilt on green linen; beneath it was the title, *America To-day and To-morrow*. He had bought but few books in his life, and he was surprised at himself for going into the shop. Its smooth counters and the orderliness of its rectangular books reminded him vaguely of a tobacconist's. He would have liked to linger and talk, but since no one encouraged him he merely paid for the book and came out with a package in his hand that he did not know what to do with. A present for Frau Hentjen? She would certainly have not the slightest interest in it, and yet there was some inexplicable connection between her and his purchase. In his perplexity he came again to a standstill in front of the shop. Behind the glass pane on a line hung a bright array of foreign phrase-books, and on their covers waved the flags of their respective nations as if to cheer on aspiring students. Esch betook himself to his midday meal in the restaurant.

One is shy of producing an unsuitable gift, and so Esch carried his into the window-seat; that was where he always read the newspaper after dinner, so he might as well sit there with his book. It didn't take long for Mother Hentjen to call across the empty room: "Well, Herr Esch, of course you can afford to sit down and read books in the middle of the day." "Yes," he answered, "I'll show it you," got up and brought it to her at the buffet. "What's it for?" she said as he held the book out; he indicated by a jerk of the head that she was to look at it; she turned over a page here and there, regarded one or two pictures with closer attention, and simply handed the book back with a "very nice." Esch was disappointed; he had indeed suspected that she wouldn't be interested, for what did a woman like her know of the greater and higher aims of life! None the less he remained standing, expecting something else to happen … but all that happened was a remark from Mother Hentjen: "I suppose you're thinking of spending the whole afternoon over that stuff?" Esch retorted: "I'm not thinking of anything," and in a huff carried the book to his own room to read it in peace. And he came to the conclusion that he would emigrate by himself. By himself, all alone. Yet he could not help assuming again and again that his study of the American work was to benefit not only himself but Mother Hentjen.

He read a portion of it every day. At first he had contented himself with the illustrations, and now when he thought of America it seemed to him that the trees there were not green, the meadows not brightly coloured, the sky no longer blue, but that all American life was deployed against a polished and elegant chiaroscuro as in the brownish grey photographs, or against the sharp contours of the delicately limned pen-drawings. Later on, however, he became absorbed in the text. The recurring statistics certainly bored him, but he was too conscientious to skip them and succeeded in learning a good deal by heart. He was deeply interested in the American police system and the law courts, which, the book averred, were organized in the service of democratic freedom, so that any man able to read a book intelligently could gather that in America no cripples were thrown into jail at the bidding of wicked shipping firms; it would be as well therefore for Martin to go with him. Esch turned over the pages at random, and strangely enough the photograph of the giant liner at the landing-stage in New York revealed Mother Hentjen in her brown-silk dress, the light-pink parasol in her hands, leaning over the railing watching the swarm of strangers, while Martin with his crutch sat on a chest, and the air was filled with syllables of the English language.

And thoroughgoing as he was, Esch decided after some hesitation to visit once more the book-shop in which he had felt so much at home. Making light of the fresh expense he purchased the English phrase-book with the inviting Union Jack and forthwith set himself to learn the English words, behind each of which he saw the word "Liberty" in the elegant half-tones of a silky and glossy photograph, as if in this one

word all that had ever existed in the past and been expressed in the old language must now be resolved and redeemed. He even made up his mind that they must speak English to each other, and that Mother Hentjen must be instructed in English to that end. But with his healthy contempt for all reverie he did not stop short at merely wishing for freedom: his profits were accumulating, and although the receipts for the last few days of the wrestling had fallen off somewhat, he had in any case a clear surplus of about two hundred marks, which he now definitely set aside as the nucleus of his travelling expenses; hence he could take action, he could escape from his prison, he could begin his new life. He was often drawn nowadays to the Cathedral. When he was on the steps overlooking Cathedral Square, and English-speaking tourists chanced to appear, it was like a breath of freedom invigorating him and caressing his brow as he stood with bared head in the warm summer wind. The very streets of Cologne began to take on another aspect, one might even say a more innocent aspect, and Esch regarded them with kindliness and almost with a hint of malicious triumph. Once he was on the other side, across the sea, they too would have a different look. And if he ever came back he would let the English-speaking guide show him over the Cathedral.—

After the performance he waited for Teltscher; the air was soft and rainy as they walked through the night. Esch stopped suddenly: “Look here, Teltscher, you’ve always been boasting about an American engagement: it’s time you did something about it.” Teltscher loved to discuss his grand prospects: “If I’ve a mind to, I can get as many engagements over there as I want.” Esch dissented: “With your knife-throwing stunt … h’m, well … don’t you think wrestling or something of that kind would go better over there?” Teltscher laughed scornfully: “You’re surely not thinking of taking our girls over!” “Well, why not?” “You’re an idiot, Esch, if you would take over that kind of stuff. In any case … over there they expect real sporting turns, but the kind of thing our girls do …” He laughed again. Esch suggested: “But couldn’t we get a good team together?” “Nonsense, people over there aren’t going to wait till we arrive,” said Teltscher, “and where could you find trained girls here?” … he reflected …“if these cows of ours were anything to look at there might possibly be something in it. But only in Mexico or South America.” Esch did not grasp his meaning at first, and Teltscher was provoked by his stupidity: “They’re always hard up for women out there … and if the wrestling wasn’t a draw the girls would at least be provided for, and we could keep all the travelling expenses in our pockets.” That seemed obvious enough. After all, why not South America or Mexico? And the half-tone photographs in Esch’s mind took on a brilliantly coloured Southern luxuriance. Yes, it was a convincing scheme. Teltscher said: “You’ve hit on a good thing this time, Esch. Make it your job to fit out the circus with new girls worth looking at. I know one or two fellows who could easily arrange a tour for us over there. And then we’ll set sail with the whole cargo.” Esch knew that the proposal savoured abominably of white slave traffic. But he could ignore that knowledge, for the wrestling matches were not illicit, and even if they gave any cause for suspicion what did it matter? that would only pay off a few scores against a police force that locked up innocent men. A police force that worked in the cause of freedom and accepted no money from shipping firms wouldn’t need to be scored off. White slave traffic, of course, wasn’t very refined, but after all even Mother Hentjen’s business was against her principles. Nor did Lohberg approve of his shop. And in any case it was better to take Teltscher to America with the circus than to leave him here throwing knives. They passed a bored policeman who was patrolling his beat in the rain, and Esch would have liked to assure him that the police would be none the worse off, for he would deliver Nentwig into their hands sooner or later! Esch was a man who upheld law and order and fulfilled his pledges, even though the other parties were swine. “Police swine,” he growled. The wet asphalt shone like a photographic film, dark brown in the light of the yellow lamps, and Esch saw before him the Statue of Liberty whose torch consumed and released all the husks of one’s past life, delivering into flame all that was dead and gone—and if that was murder, it was a kind of murder beyond the jurisdiction of the police: murder in the cause of redemption. His decision was taken, and when Teltscher advised him on parting: “And don’t forget, it’s always blonde girls they want out there, nothing but blonde,” he accepted the fact that he was to seek out and provide blonde girls. He had only to settle up his old scores, and then they would set sail with their cargo of blondes. From the lofty deck of the ocean liner they would look down on the swarm of smaller craft. They would cry a farewell to the Old World, a final good-bye. Perhaps the blondes on the ship would strike up a farewell song in chorus, and when the ship on its taut tow-rope glided past the river shores perhaps Ilona would be walking on the bank and would wave a hand, herself a blonde, but rescued from all danger, and the level water would broaden between them.

Esch should really have admitted that his mistress stood on the same plane as himself: for if he kept love in a subordinate place Mother Hentjen ignored it. In that she was his match, although moved by other considerations than his. She regarded love as something so profoundly secret that she scarcely ventured to pronounce the word. She forgot again and again the existence of this lover who was now established and whom she could not prevent from stealing in upon her of an afternoon when she was taking her nap or at

night when her last customers had departed, and again and again at his approach she was overwhelmed with petrified astonishment, a state of petrifaction that only began gradually to wear away when the dim parlour and the alcove had received them both: then it dissolved into a feeling of detached isolation, and the dark alcove in which she lay looking up at the ceiling began to float away till soon it seemed no longer a part of her familiar house, but was like a soaring chariot hanging somewhere in infinite space and darkness. Only then did she realize that somebody else was there beside her, occupied with her, and it was no longer Esch, it was no longer even a man she knew, it was a Someone who had strangely and violently thrust himself into her isolation, and yet could not be reproached for his violence since he was a part of that isolation and could be found only within it, a Someone, quiet and yet threatening, demanding assuagement for his violence, and therefore one had to play the game with him that he demanded, and though the game was compulsory it was yet strangely guiltless, since it was engulfed in isolation and even God shut His eyes to it. But he with whom she shared the bed was little likely to suspect the nature of that isolation, and she was sternly on her guard to keep him from impinging upon it. A profound muteness enveloped him, and she would not let that disconcerting silence be assailed, even should he mistake it for insensibility or stupidity. Silence abolished shame, for shame was born only in speech. What she felt was not bodily lust but release from shame: she was so isolated that, as if alone for all eternity, she could no longer be ashamed of a single fibre in her body. He could not understand her muteness, and yet was disheartened by the shameless silence that invited and submitted to him in brutish immobility. She gave him barely a sigh, and he was all agonized expectation and hope that she would finally let her voice go in a cry of satisfied animal lust. Too often he waited in vain, and then he hated the solicitous crook of the arm with which she invited him to lay down his head and sleep on her plump, unmoved shoulder. But when she sent her lover away it was with hard abruptness, as if she suddenly wanted to annihilate both him and the knowledge he shared with her: she pushed him out through the door, and as he stole down the stairs he could feel her hatred at his back. That gave him an inkling that it was a strange, strange land he had been in, and in spite of himself the knowledge always impelled him back to her again with torment and increasing desire. For even in the bliss of losing himself, of sinking tranced and nameless in the shamelessness of sex, the desire to overcome the woman kept stubborn vigil, the desire to force her to acknowledge him, to make the present moment flame up in her like a torch that burned up all else, so that in its glare she should be aware of her mate, and out of the silence of night that enveloped everything should let her voice ring out passionately, and say “du” to him and to him alone, as if he were her child. He no longer knew what she looked like, she was beyond beauty and ugliness, beyond youth and age, she was only a silent problem that he was set to master and to resolve.

Although in many respects Esch could not have wished for a better, and even had to admit that it was a lofty kind of love, surpassing ordinary standards, that had laid its spell upon him, yet it always annoyed him, time and again, that whenever he came into the restaurant Mother Hentjen, anxious lest the other customers should suspect something, was so markedly cold to him that against her will she made him conspicuous. Had it not been that he wanted to avoid further notice and even scandal, and had not his cheap and bountiful dinner been in question, he would simply have stayed away. As it was, he made an effort to be compliant and to strike the happy mean in his visits; but he could not manage it, he could not please Mother Hentjen whatever he did: if he appeared in the restaurant she put on a sulky face and obviously wished him gone, and if he stayed away she asked him spitefully if he had perhaps been off with his negress.

Teltscher thought that they could not decently refuse to give Gernerth a chance to share in the South American project. With that the plan would have acquired a certain solidity in Esch’s eyes. But Gernerth declined, giving as an excuse his family, which he wanted to have with him when he took on his new contract in autumn. So the windbag Teltscher remained Esch’s sole associate. He was certainly not much to depend on, but the project should not be postponed for all that; Esch began his canvassing at once, and set out on the search for women wrestlers fit for export. Perhaps in its course he might actually run across the negress whom they still wanted; that of course would be an extra piece of luck.

He again made his round of the dens and brothels, and if he sometimes felt a slight twinge of conscience in doing so, it was only because Frau Hentjen, if she should find out, would never believe that he devoted himself to such a task out of mere business considerations. So, as a kind of proof of his erotic indifference, as a moral though quite preposterous alibi, he extended his business researches to include the homosexual resorts, resorts which hitherto he had avoided almost apprehensively. Yet he felt vaguely that there must be another reason for his desire to visit them. What took place in them should have left him quite unmoved, and it was really queer, the horror that overcame him when he saw these men dancing with each other, cheek pressed against cheek. Then he could not help thinking of his first visit to one of those filthy dens

when he was a mere lad at a loose end in the world, a lad who could scarcely remember his mother, and how he had felt that he wanted to run away to her the first time that he had caught sight of a male prostitute, tightly laced and in long skirts, singing obscene songs in a falsetto voice. If he forced himself to gaze at such abominations again, considering that the sight of them almost made him vomit, Mother Hentjen would be compelled to realize, in spite of her prudishness, how little pleasure he got out of his job. God knows, he would rather run to her than haunt such places, searching for he knew not what, as if he were looking for his lost innocence. Quite preposterous to think that one might run up against, say, the chairman of a company, for these street boys were certainly beneath the notice of a man like that. All the same, with such a queer lot one had to be prepared for anything. And as in venturous situations one exercises self-control, Esch did not bash in the painted mugs of these little manikins when they spoke to him; on the contrary he was on his best behaviour, treated them to sweet liqueurs, asked how they were getting on and—if they became confidential—inquired also into their source of income and the names of their kind uncles. True, he wondered sometimes why he listened to all their chatter, but he pricked up his ears when the name of Chairman Bertrand was mentioned; then the vague picture that he carried in his mind of that great man, a picture scarcely legible and yet larger than life-size, acquired gradually more colour, took on strangely tender hues, and became at the same time a little smaller as it grew more sharp and definite. Bertrand, it seemed, sailed up and down the Rhine in a motor-yacht, and his crew were very handsome; everything on this dream-boat was white and blue; once he had come to Cologne and little Harry had had the great honour of finding favour in his eyes; they had gone as far as Antwerp in the fairy yacht and in Ostend had lived like gods; but usually he was too grand to pay any attention to the kind of boys that came here. His castle stood in a great park in Badenweiler; deer grazed in the meadows and strange flowers scented the air; he stayed there when he was not in distant lands; nobody had entry to his castle, and his friends were Englishmen and Indians of fabulous wealth; he owned a motor-car, and it was so huge that one could sleep in it at nights. He was richer than the Kaiser.

Esch almost forgot his own work, so powerfully was he possessed by the desire to find Harry Köhler; and when he succeeded, his heart beat so fast and he bore himself so respectfully that one might have imagined he did not know that the small youth was little better than a street boy. He forgot his hatred, forgot that Martin had to suffer so that this lad might lead a fine life; yes, he felt almost jealous because to this boy who was accustomed to fine and well-to-do company he could not offer anything better than a visit to the wrestling performance, which, however, he affably put at Herr Harry's disposal. But the boy, not in the least impressed, simply refused with a disgusted "Pah!" so that Esch felt ashamed of having suggested anything so unseemly; yet as he felt annoyed too, he said rudely: "Well, I haven't a yacht to invite you to." "How? What do you mean by that?" was the suspicious, yet strangely gentle reply. Alfons, the fat, blond musician, who was sitting coatless at the table in a gaudy silk shirt with rolls of fat beneath it that looked like a woman's breasts, laughed, showing his white teeth: "He means—you know what yourself, Harry." Harry looked offended: "I hope you don't intend to insult anyone, my dear sir." God forbid, Esch replied glibly, that was far from his thoughts; he was only sorry because he knew that Herr Harry was used to finer things. With a smile of gentle resignation Harry waved his hand languidly: "That's past." Alfons patted his arm: "Never mind, my boy, there's lots here willing to comfort you." Harry shook his head in gentle melancholy: "One can only love once." This fellow talked like Lohberg, thought Esch, and he said: "That's true." For although the Mannheim idiot wasn't very often right, in this case he seemed to be right, and Esch said again: "Yes, that's true." Harry was obviously pleased to find one who understood him, and looked at Esch gratefully, but Alfons, who did not want to hear such sentiments, became indignant: "And all the friendship we offer you, Harry, means nothing to you?" Harry shook his head: "What does the little scrap of intimacy amount to that you call friendship? As if love had anything to do with friendship and intimacy!" "Well, my boy, you have your own views of love," said Alfons tenderly. Harry spoke as though from memory: "Love is great distance." While Alfons replied: "That's far too deep for a poor devil of a musician, my boy," Esch could not but think of Frau Hentjen's silence. The band was making a great din, and Harry, leaning over the table so as not to have to shout, said mysteriously and in a low voice: "Love is a matter of distance; here are two people, and each is on a separate star, and neither can know anything of the other. And then suddenly distance is annihilated and time is annihilated, and they have flown together, so that they have no separate awareness of each other or of themselves, and feel no need of it. That is love." Esch thought of Badenweiler; of a remote love in that remote castle; something of the kind was perhaps preordained for Ilona. But while he was still brooding over this, a pang of rage and pain darted through him at the thought that never would he be able to discover whether it had been with this noble form of love or another that Herr and Frau Hentjen had loved each other. Harry continued as if he were reciting a verse from the Bible: "Only in a dreadful intensification of strangeness, only when the strangeness has become in a sense infinite, can the miracle happen, the unattainable goal of love: the mystery of oneness … yes, that's

how it is." "Prosit!" said Alfons glumly, but to Esch it seemed that this boy had been given knowledge of higher things, and the hope awoke in him that that knowledge might also hold the answer to his own questions. And although his thoughts were by no means in harmony with those which Harry had expressed, he said, as he had once said to Lohberg: "But in that case one could not go on living after the other," and he was filled with the half-joyful, half-bitter assurance that the widow Hentjen, seeing that she was still alive, could not have loved her husband. Alfons whispered to Esch: "For Heaven's sake, don't say such things before the boy," but he was too late, for Harry looked at Esch in horror and said tonelessly, just a trace more tonelessly than necessary: "I'm not really living now." Alfons pushed across a double glass of liqueur to him. "Poor fellow, ever since that affair he's talked like this … that man completely turned his head." Esch felt himself jerked back into reality; he put on an innocent air: "Who?" Alfons shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, him, the Lord God himself, the angel of purity …" "Hold your jaw, or I'll scratch your eyes out," panted Harry, and Esch, who felt sorry for the boy, said imperiously: "Leave him in peace." Suddenly Harry broke out into hysterical sobbing: "I'm not really living now, I'm not …" Esch felt rather helpless, for he could not employ here the methods which he was accustomed to use with girls when they cried. So that man had ruined this boy's life too, it seemed; Esch wanted to do something to comfort Harry and said abruptly: "We'll shoot this Bertrand for you." Harry screamed: "You'll do nothing of the kind!" "Why not? You should be pleased; he's earned it." "You shan't, you shan't do it …" the boy panted, glaring at him "… don't you dare to touch him.…" Esch was irritated at the boy for so stupidly misunderstanding his good intentions. "A swine like that must be put away," he persisted. "He's not a swine," Harry said beseechingly, "he's the noblest, the best, the handsomest man in the world." In a sense the boy was certainly right, one couldn't injure such a man. Esch was on the point of giving his promise. "Hopeless," said Alfons dejectedly, drinking up his liqueur. Harry had leant his head between his hands, and nodding like an image he began to laugh: "Him a swine! Him a swine!" then his laughter suddenly changed into sobs again. When Alfons made to draw him to his fat, silken breast Esch had to interpose to prevent a fight. He told Alfons to clear out, and then turned to Harry: "Let's go. Where do you live?" Quite passive now, the boy obeyed him, and named his address. When they reached the street Esch took his arm as if he were a girl, and the one providing, the other accepting protection, they felt almost happy. A light wind was blowing from the Rhine. Before his door Harry clung to Esch, and seemed about to offer his face to be kissed. Esch pushed him through the door. But Harry slipped out again and whispered: "You won't do anything to him!" and before Esch knew what was happening the boy had embraced him, awkwardly kissed his sleeve, and vanished into the house.

The attendance at the wrestling performances was palpably falling off, and something had to be done in the way of publicity. Without consulting the others, Esch decided on his own responsibility to persuade *The People's Guardian* to insert a report. But before the dingy white door of the editorial office he recognized quite clearly that once more it was something else that had led him here. In itself this visit was quite meaningless and futile; the entire wrestling business had become indifferent to him, for it was not achieving anything even for Ilona, and so something more significant, more decisive, must be done for her, and he saw clearly too that *The People's Guardian* would not insert a report now, if they had omitted to do so hitherto because of some proletarian prejudice or other. Fundamentally the attitude of the Socialist paper was praiseworthy: at least it knew its right hand from its left, and drew a clear-cut distinction between the bourgeois and the proletarian points of view. One should really draw Mother Hentjen's attention to such strength of character: she might no longer disdainfully dismiss these people, who, although ordinary Socialists, yet condemned the wrestling business as much as she did herself, and she might no longer look askance at Martin either for being a Socialist. Esch was brought up with a start when he thought of Martin; the devil alone knew what he, August Esch, was doing here in this place! but it was clear that it had no connection with the wrestling. He was still brooding over this while he entered, and not until he was forced to jog the editor's memory by mentioning the strike—for the editor, most unflatteringly, had failed to recognize him—not until then did it dawn on Esch that he had come here on Martin's account. He said abruptly: "I have an important piece of news for you." "Oh, the strike!" with a wave of the hand the editor reduced that event to triviality, "that's ancient history." "Indeed!" replied Esch angrily, "but Geyring is still in prison." "Well? He got three months, didn't he?" "Something has got to be done," Esch heard himself saying in a louder voice than he had intended. "Well, don't shout at me like that—I didn't lock him up." Esch wasn't a man to be put off by such words. "Something has got to be done," he persisted grimly and impatiently, "I know some of the customers that your fine Herr Bertrand associates with … and they're here in Cologne, not in Italy!" he added triumphantly. "We've known that for several years, my dear friend and comrade. Or is that the piece of news you wanted to tell us?" Esch felt stunned. "Well, but why don't you do something, then? He's put himself in your hands." "My dear fellow," said the other, "you seem to have

somewhat childish ideas of things. All the same you ought to know that we live in a civilized country." He waited now for Esch to take his leave, but Esch did not move, and so for a while the two men sat opposite each other, not knowing what to make of each other, not understanding each other, and each seeing only the other's naked moral unsightliness. Red spots of anger appeared on Esch's cheeks, and faded again into tan. The editor was once more wearing his light-brown velvet jacket, and his slightly plump face with the brown, drooping moustache was at once soft and strong like the velvet of his jacket. A slight trace of coquetry lay in this correspondence, reminding Esch of the finicking attire of the youths at the homosexual resort. He became aggressive: "So you're shielding that homosexual of yours, are you? And Martin can do time for it, for all you care?" He twisted his mouth into an expression of disgust, showing his strong teeth. The editor became impatient: "Look here, my dear sir, what business is it of yours anyway?" Esch grew red in the face: "You deliberately hinder anything that might get him out … you wouldn't print my article; you shield the scoundrel that got him thrown into prison, this Bertrand … and you, you give yourself out as a guardian of freedom!" He laughed bitterly. "With you freedom is in safe keeping!" A fool, evidently, thought the editor, and so he replied quietly: "Look here, technically speaking it's quite impossible for us to publish as news something that you bring us weeks and months too late; it's just …" Esch jumped up. "You'll get news that you don't like from me yet," he shouted, rushing out and slamming the dingy white door behind him, which, however, did not remain shut, but went on banging.

When he reached the street he stopped aghast. Why had he blazed up like that? Could he alter the fact that these Socialists were swine? Once more Frau Hentjen had proved to be right in scorning the whole crew of them. "The corrupt Press," he kept on saying to himself. And he had gone there with the best intentions too, had wished to give them an opportunity to justify themselves in Frau Hentjen's eyes. Things as they were and things as they ought to be began anew to get entangled in a most exasperating confusion and chaos. Only one thing was certain, that the editor had behaved like a swine, firstly by his general attitude, and secondly because he sought to shield this Bertrand with all the resources of a corrupt Press, yes, a corrupt Press. And this chairman fellow himself was a proper swine, although the boy Harry would not admit it, and there was nothing one could do to put a stop to him. On the other hand what the boy had said about love was quite right. Nothing was simple! at most only one thing had come out clearly: Frau Hentjen could not have loved her husband; she must have been forced into marriage with that swine. And as Esch's thoughts filled with hatred of the world around him, and of the swine who should be done in, as such swine deserved, he began more and more definitely to hate the chairman Bertrand, to hate him for his blasphemies and his crimes. He tried to picture Bertrand sitting in a comfortable chair after dinner in his castle, surrounded by luxury, a fat cigar in his hand, and when that elegant figure at length emerged as from a cloud of tobacco smoke, it was somewhat like that of a dandified snippet of a tailor, strongly resembling the portrait of Herr Hentjen which hung over the mantelpiece in the restaurant.

For Mother Hentjen's birthday, which was duly celebrated every year by the regular customers, Esch had hunted out a small bronze Statue of Liberty, and the gift seemed to him ingenious, not only as hinting at their American future, but also as a happy pendant to the Schiller statue, with which he had scored such a success. At midday he put in an appearance with it.

Unfortunately the present failed of its effect. If he had handed it to her in dead secrecy she might have appreciated the beauty of the sculpture, but the panic fear into which any public familiarity, any sign of intimacy, threw her, so blinded her that she evinced but little delight, nor did she become any warmer in her manner when he apologetically added that the statue would probably go well with the Schiller monument. "Well, if you think so …" she said non-committally, and that was all. Of course the new present, too, would have served very well to embellish her room; but to show him that he must not flatter himself that he was entitled to claim such a privileged position for everything he brought her, and to prove to him once and for all that she still upheld the inviolateness of her room, she went upstairs and fetched the Schiller monument, and planted it along with the Statue of Liberty on the mantelpiece beside the Eiffel Tower. There were now collected the bard of freedom, the American statue and the French tower, as symbols of an attitude which Frau Hentjen did not share, and the statue stretched its arm upwards, stretched its torch upwards towards Herr Hentjen. Esch felt his gifts desecrated by Herr Hentjen's gaze, and he would have liked to ask that the portrait at least should be removed; yet what help would that have been? this restaurant in which Herr Hentjen had worked would remain the same, and it was almost more to his liking that everything should remain frankly and honestly where it was. Why try dishonestly to conceal something which it was impossible to conceal! And he made the discovery that what drew him here was not merely the excellence of the food dispensed to him under the eyes of Herr Hentjen, but that he also needed Herr Hentjen in some mysterious way as a strange and bitter seasoning to his food; it was the same inescapable bitter dose that he accepted in Mother Hentjen's moroseness, and that made him feel bound

inescapably to her when she morosely whispered to him, as now, that he could come that night.

He spent the afternoon in lascivious thoughts of Mother Hentjen's matter-of-fact love rites. And once more he was tortured by that matter-of-factness, which contradicted so blatantly her customary aversion. In whose nightly embraces could she have contracted those habits? A hope in which he himself did not believe faintly dawned, promising that all this would fall away once they were in America, and the comfort of this hope mingled with the excitement which now came over him when he felt her house-door key in his pocket. Esch took out the key, held it in the palm of his hand, and felt the smooth metal of the handle. True, she had refused to learn English, but the wind of the future blew once more through the streets. The key to freedom, he thought. The cathedral rose grey in the late twilight, iron-grey soared the towers, and a breath of the new and the unfamiliar fanned them. Esch counted the hours until night. It was more important to hunt out girls for the South American journey than to go to the Alhambra. Five full hours, then he would be at the house door. Esch saw the alcove, saw her lying on the bed; and the thought of stealing in to her, the thought that at the touch of his aroused body her body would palpitate, made his breathing difficult and his mouth dry. For even last week, as during all the weeks before, she had received him in dull impassivity, and although that brief involuntary palpitation was insignificant in itself, yet it was a point at which the immense dead-weight of habit had been quickened, a tiny point, it was true, and yet a virginal one, and that was a herald of hope and of the future. And to Esch it seemed dishonourable to enter prostitutes' resorts on the evening of Mother Hentjen's birthday, so he betook himself to the Alhambra.

When afterwards he returned to the restaurant he could see from a long way off the yellow radiance on the uneven cobbles outside. The windows with their panes of bull's-eye glass were open, and inside he could see Mother Hentjen sitting, stiff in her silk dress, surrounded by her noisy customers; a bowl of punch stood on the table. Esch remained in the shadow; the thought of entering filled him with loathing. He turned away again, but not to go duteously in search of girls at their resorts; he strode in fury through the streets. On the Rhine Bridge he leant against the iron parapet, gazed down into the black water and across at the sheds on the quay. His knees were trembling, so intense had been his desire to burst the rigid bony construction in which that woman was encased; the whalebones would have cracked in the wild struggle. With an expressionless face he trailed back into the town, mechanically running his hand along the bars of the bridge railing as he went.

The house was dark. Mother Hentjen, a candlestick in her hand, was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He simply blew out the candle-butt and seized her. But she had already taken off her corsets, nor did she defend herself, but instead gave him a tender kiss. And although this greeting took him quite by surprise, and was perhaps no less novel than that palpitation for which he was waiting so impatiently, yet from this kiss it was terribly and incontrovertibly clear that one of her old habits had been to conclude her birthday celebrations with a tender love rite, and when the longed-for moment now actually arrived, when that blissful palpitation ran through her body, the thought that the touch of Herr Hentjen's body, which in his present position Esch had no wish to picture, had also made her palpitate just like this, became a raging pain; the ghost which he had fancied was laid arose again, more mocking, more inconquerable than ever, and to conquer it and to show this woman that he, he alone was there, he flung himself upon her and sank his teeth into her plump shoulder. It must have hurt her, but she bore it in silence, although she made a wry face as though she had bitten on something sour, and when presently, exhausted, he made to leave her, she clasped him to her as in gratitude,—and yet her heavy awkward arm was like a vice—clasped him so fast that he could scarcely breathe and wrathfully struggled to free himself. She did not give way, but said—it was the first time that she had spoken to him in the alcove—in her usual business voice, in which nevertheless, had he been more sensitive, he might have heard a note almost of fear: "Why were you so late in coming?… because another year has been added to my age?" Esch was so stunned by her speaking at all that he did not grasp the meaning of her words; indeed, did not even attempt to grasp it, for the unexpected sound of her voice was to him like the termination of something, was like a sudden illumination after a long and painful process of thought, a sign that things could take on a different aspect. He said: "I'm sick of it, I'm going to finish it off." The blood froze in Frau Hentjen's veins; she had scarcely enough strength left to unclasp her arm from his shoulder; she felt leaden and icy, and her arm fell powerlessly of itself. All that she still knew was that she must not show her dismay before a man, that she must give him his marching orders before he went of his own accord, and summoning all her strength she brought out faintly: "Certainly, for all I care." Esch took no notice of this and went on: "Next week I'll go to Baden." What need had he to tell her this as well? She felt somehow flattered that his resolve to end the affair should shake him so deeply, it seemed, that it was driving him away from Cologne, out into the world. Yet he was pressing his lips again to her shoulder, and that was surely a queer way of showing that he wanted to finish with her. Or did he simply want to indulge his lust up to the very last minute? men were capable of anything! Nevertheless she picked up hope again, and although her voice was still difficult to control she

asked: “Why? Is there another girl there like the one in Ober-Wesel?” Esch laughed: “Yes, you might call it that, a girl just like her.” Frau Hentjen was indignant at his flippancy on the top of everything else: “It’s easy enough to make game of a weak woman.” Esch still thought she was referring to the person in Badenweiler: “Oh, the one in Baden isn’t so terribly weak as all that.” This fed her suspicions anew: “Who is it?” “A secret.” She maintained an offended silence, and submitted to his renewed caresses. Presently she asked: “Why should you want another woman?” In spite of himself he could not but secretly admit that this woman with her matter-of fact, almost businesslike and yet so curiously reluctant and chaste surrender, accorded him more intense pleasure and bliss than any other woman could, and that he really wanted nobody else. She said again: “Why should you want another woman? You’ve only to tell me if I’m not young enough for you.” He did not reply, for suddenly the fact that she had spoken at last filled him with excitement and elation; she who hitherto had lain silent in his arms, her head rolling in persistent negation, so unalterably silent that her silence had always seemed to him a legacy from the time of Herr Hentjen. She felt his happiness, and she went on proudly: “You don’t need any of those young things; I’m a match for any of them.” Nonsense, thought Esch, with a sudden stab of pain, she must be lying. And with a stab of pain he remembered Harry’s words and repeated them: “One can only love once,” and when Frau Hentjen simply said “Yes,” as if she meant to convey by this that he was the man whom she loved, then it was clear what a liar she was; pretended to be disgusted by men and yet sat drinking with them at her table, and let them drink her health; pretended to love him now, and yet was inconquerably matter-of-fact. But perhaps all this was wrong, for she had no children. Once more his desire for the unambiguous, the absolute, was brought up against an unscalable wall. If all this were only past and done with! His journey to Badenweiler appeared to him at that moment as a necessary prelude, an inevitable preliminary to the journey to America. Evidently she guessed at these thoughts of travel, for she asked: “What does she look like?” “Who?” “Why, the Baden girl.” Well, what did Bertrand look like? and more clearly than ever he recognized that he could picture Bertrand only by calling up Hentjen’s portrait. He replied harshly: “The portrait must be taken away.” She did not understand: “What portrait?” “That one below there,” he could not bring himself to utter the name, “above the Eiffel Tower.” She began to understand, but she rebelled against this attempt of his to mingle in her affairs: “Nobody has ever objected to it.” “And that’s just why,” he persisted, and now it became quite clear to him that it was his affair with Hentjen that he had to settle with Bertrand, and he went on: “and besides, an end must be put to all this.” “Well, perhaps …” she replied hesitatingly, and her rebellious feelings making her unwilling to understand, she added: “An end to what?” “We must go to America.” “Yes,” she said, “I know.”

Esch had got up. He would have liked to walk up and down, as he was accustomed to do when anything occupied his mind, but there was no room in the alcove, and outside the nuts lay about the floor. So he sat down on the edge of the bed. And although he did his best to repeat Harry’s words they changed when he tried to utter them:

“Love is only possible in a strange country. If you want to love really, you must begin a new life and destroy everything in your old one. Only in a new, quite strange life, where everything past is so dead that you don’t even need to forget it, can two human beings become so at one that the past and even time itself no longer exist for them.”

“I haven’t a past,” said Mother Hentjen in an offended voice.

“Only then,” Esch made an angry grimace which in the darkness Frau Hentjen luckily could not see, “only then will there be no need any longer to deny anything, for then truth will reign, and truth is beyond time.”

“I’ve never denied anything,” said Mother Hentjen in defence.

Esch did not let himself be put off: “Truth has nothing to do with the world, nothing to do with Mannheim …” he almost shouted, “it has nothing to do with this old world.”

Mother Hentjen sighed. Esch gave her a sharp glance:

“There’s nothing to sigh over; you must free yourself from the old world, so as to become free yourself.…”

Mother Hentjen sighed uneasily: “What’s to become of the restaurant? Shall we sell it?”

Esch said with conviction: “Sacrifices must be made … that’s absolutely certain, for there’s no salvation without sacrifice.”

“If we go away we’ll have to get married,” and once more a little apprehensively: “… I suppose I’m too old for you to marry?”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Esch regarded her in the light of the flickering candle. With his finger he wrote a “37” on the coverlet. He might have given her a cake with thirty-seven candles; no, better as it was, for she made a secret of her age, and would only have been annoyed. He contemplated her heavy, immobile features, and suddenly he would have liked her to be still older, a great deal older than she was. It seemed to him, although he did not know why, that that would have made things surer. If she were suddenly to

become young and lie there in the fleeting semblance of youth, it would be all up with the sacrifice. And the sacrifice had to be, had to grow even greater along with his devotion to this ageing woman, so that the world might be put in order and Ilona might be shielded from the daggers, so that all living beings might be reinstated in their first innocence, and no one need any longer languish in prison. Well, one thing could be depended on, Mother Hentjen would soon grow old and ugly. The world seemed to him like a level, smooth, endless corridor, and he said absently:

"We must lay the restaurant with brown linoleum; that would look nice."

Mother Hentjen picked up hope: "Yes, and get it painted too; the whole place is going to ruin … all these years nothing's been done … but if you want to go to America …?"

Esch repeated the words: "All these years.…"

Mother Hentjen felt an apology was due: "One has to save, and one postpones a thing from year to year … and time passes …" and then she added: "… and one grows old."

Esch felt irritated: "When there are no children, saving is ridiculous … nobody ever saved up for me."

But Mother Hentjen was not listening. She merely wanted to find out whether it was worth while having the restaurant painted; she asked: "Are you going to take me to America with you? … or a young thing?"

Esch replied roughly: "What's all this eternal talk about young and old? … There will be no young and no old then, and there won't be any time then either …"

Esch was brought up short. An old woman could not have children. That perhaps was part of the sacrifice. But in a state of innocence nobody had children. Virgins had no children. And as he slipped back into bed he added conclusively: "Then everything will be firm and sure. And what you've left behind you can't do you any more harm."

He tugged the coverlet into position and also drew it carefully over Mother Hentjen's shoulder. Thereupon he put out his hand for the tin extinguisher that hung on the candlestick and that Herr Hentjen too had employed on such occasions, and clapped it on the flickering candle.

Mannheim lies on the way to Baden. And Esch remembered that a man must do his duty by his friends. Something had been bothering him for a long time and now he knew what it was: he could not leave his friends' money in a losing business. They had earned more than fifty per cent. on their investment so far and that was all right, but now these profits must be secured. It was time to quit. His own three hundred marks were on a different footing. Should he lose them it would serve him right. For with a profit of fifty per cent. and two months' expenses over and above that—and not a bad two months either—where did the sacrifice come in which was to redeem Ilona? And to finance his flight to America and liberty out of such ill-gotten gains would be another falsification: it was high time to call off the wrestling matches, profits and all. Mother Hentjen was right enough in her prophecy that he and all his pack of women would end up in disgrace and scandal.

But meanwhile he had to secure the money for Lohberg and Erna. It wasn't easy to buttonhole Gernerth on the matter: in the evenings he kept grumbling about the empty theatre and in the daytime he was hard to catch: he was never in the Alhambra, he never seemed to enter his flat at all, and at Oppenheimer's place there was nothing but two untidy rooms and no sign of anybody. Moreover, if one asked him where he usually took his meals, Gernerth replied: "Oh, I just make do with a sandwich, the father of a family can't spread himself much," which was, of course, hardly true, for one day when the English tourists were crossing the Cathedral square, who should come out of the Cathedral Hotel's marble vestibule but Herr Gernerth himself, looking well-fed and with a fat cigar in his mouth? "Publicity, my dear friend, publicity," he had said, and made himself scarce, as if anybody would have taken it amiss were he to live all the time in the Cathedral Hotel, and his whole family with him. To-day, anyhow, he wouldn't get off: Esch would take care of that!

So in the evening Esch opened the door of the manager's office, locked it behind him, grinning widely, pocketed the key, and with another wide grin presented to the trapped Gernerth a neatly ruled account of the profits to date due to Herr Fritz Lohberg and Fräulein Erna Korn on their invested capital of 2000 marks, amounting to 1123 marks, which with the capital made a sum-total of 3123 marks to be repaid, and under it was written "settled in full in the name of the said parties, August Esch." Besides that he demanded his own money. Gernerth shrieked murder and robbery. In the first place Esch had no legal power to sign a settlement, and in the second place the wrestling matches were still going on, and money couldn't be withdrawn from a going concern. They wrangled for some time, until at length with many lamentations Gernerth agreed to pay out the half of the sum due to Lohberg and Erna, while the other half was to remain invested and share in any further profits that arose. But for himself Esch could extract nothing save an advance of fifty marks for travelling expenses. Perhaps he had been too complaisant. In any case that was enough for the journey to Baden.

Frau Hentjen in her brown silk came to the station and peered round cautiously for any sign of an acquaintance who might see her and gossip about her. For although it was early there were swarms of people. At the other platform there stood a train going in the opposite direction, and several carriages for emigrants, Czechs or Hungarians, were being shunted on to it, and Salvation Army officials were running up and down. Now, Mother Hentjen's presence at the station was but right and proper: it was high time she gave up her stupid affectation of secrecy. All the same, Esch had a bad conscience when he saw the emigrants and the Salvation Army people. "Silly sheep!" he grumbled. He could not tell why he was so provoked. Apparently he had caught the absurd disease of secrecy from Mother Hentjen, for when one of the Salvation girls passed by he looked the other way. Frau Hentjen remarked it: "I suppose you're ashamed of my being here? Perhaps you've got another woman travelling with you?" Esch with some rudeness told her not to be a fool. But that was the last straw: "That's all one gets for compromising oneself … one can't touch pitch without being defiled." Once more Esch could not understand what bound him to this woman. As she stood there facing him in the daylight the remembrance of her sexual submission and of the dim alcove, the images that haunted him as soon as he was away from her, sank into oblivion as if they had never existed. With this same train he and she had travelled together to Bacharach; that was the beginning of the affair—perhaps to-day would see its end. Evidently she felt his detachment, for she said suddenly: "If you're unfaithful to me, I'll soon let you see.…" He was flattered and wanted her to go on; at the same time he wanted to hurt her: "All right, I'm going to do it this very day … what'll I see?" She stiffened and made no answer. That softened him, and he took her hand, which lay heavy and awkward in his. "Well, well, what'll happen then?" She said with a vacant eye: "I'll do you in." It was like a promise and a hope of redemption; yet he forced himself to laugh. She was not to be diverted, however, from her thoughts. "What else could I do?" After a pause: "You're probably going as far as Ober-Wesel? … to that woman?" Esch grew impatient: "Nonsense, I've told you a hundred times that I must settle up my affairs with Lohberg in Mannheim … aren't we going to America?" Frau Hentjen was not convinced: "Be honest about it." Esch impatiently waited for the signal to be given for the train's departure; he must on no account betray his intention to visit Bertrand: "Haven't I invited you to come with me?" "You didn't really mean it." But now that the signal was just going to be given it seemed to Esch that he really had meant the invitation to be taken seriously, and as he stood holding her plump arm he wanted to give her a kiss; she fended him off: "What, here before all these people!" And at that moment he had to climb into the train.

He had really intended to go straight through to Badenweiler, and it was only when he saw the name of Saint-Goar station that he definitely decided to get off at Mannheim. Yes, and from Mannheim he would write to her; that would soothe her down—and Esch smiled tenderly as he thought of her desire to kill him; he might really give her the chance. In any case his visit to Badenweiler was a bit of a venture, a risk that might lose him everything, and it was only decent to hand over other people's money first. The sentence "Human life isn't to be lightly taken" occurred to him, and wove itself into the rhythm of the rolling wheels. He saw Mother Hentjen lifting a dainty revolver, and then he heard Harry saying again: "You're not to do anything to him." Then Lohberg too, and Ilona and Fräulein Erna and Balthasar Korn appeared in a row before him, and he was amazed to think he had not seen them for so long; perhaps they hadn't been alive at all in the interval. They raised their arms in rhythmical measure to greet him, and it was as if an invisible and elegant showman were jerking them like marionettes on wires that suddenly revealed themselves. A third-class compartment is like a prison-cell, and up on the stage, high up on the left side where that tooth was missing, a grey screen from the side-wings suddenly came forward, a pasteboard screen behind which there was nothing save the dusty grey wall of the stage. But on the screen the word "Prison" appeared clearly, and although he knew that there was nothing behind it he knew all the same that there was Somebody in that prison, Somebody who did not exist and yet was the chief character in the play. But the stage, on which the pasteboard prison projected like a tooth, was cut off by an enormous back-drop on which a beautiful park was painted. Deer were grazing beneath mighty trees, and a girl dressed in shimmering spangles was plucking flowers. The gardener, in a wide-brimmed straw hat, his shining shears in his hand and a little dog beside him, was standing beside a dark lake whose fountain sent a crystal jet into the air like a glittering whip and spread coolness around. Far in the distance could be seen the lights and the ornamental outline of a magnificent castle with a black-white-and-red banner waving from the battlements. And that brought back all the uncertainty.

Now that Esch was approaching Mannheim it came into his head that Erna had certainly been sleeping with Lohberg, that pure Joseph. There was really no question about it, it was to be taken for granted and was hardly worth thinking over, it was to be taken for granted as much as the nose on one's face or the feet one walked on. Nothing and nobody could have shaken Esch's conviction that this was so; what else could the couple have found to do together? And yet he was mistaken. For even though life does not offer much

variety, and though very little is necessary to bring two people of opposite sexes to an understanding, there are many things that are less to be taken for granted than one would think. A man like Esch who is still entangled in the earthly life of day after day, or has risen only a very little way above it, can easily forget that there is a Kingdom of Heaven whose stability throws all that is earthly into uncertainty, so that it can suddenly become doubtful whether one does actually walk on one's feet. In this case the fact was that Lohberg was restrained from crossing the boundary of idealistic and noble friendship partly by his shyness and partly by his unsleeping mistrust of the female sex, especially since sordid experience had taught him to dread the poison of sordid disease, and since he could not help remembering that Erna had been exposed to the attentions of a professed rake, living cheek by jowl with her. Lohberg was that kind of man. He merely went walking with Fräulein Erna Korn, drank coffee with her, and regarded his acquaintance with her as a time of probation and penance that would find its consummation only when a sign from on high was given him, the sign, so to speak, of true redeeming grace.

Esch, of course, knew that the idiot was virtuous, but was incapable of conceiving the extent of his virtue, and even more incapable of realizing that he himself was still a cause of disquietude to Fräulein Erna, that he still disturbed her blood, if not her heart, and that it was probably on his account that she was in no hurry to give Lohberg the sign of redeeming grace, nay, even deliberately delayed it, regarding such delay as a proper preparation for the married state. These things Esch was incapable of divining, and still less that the pair of them found much pleasure in discovering grave defects in his character, and with their usual enthusiasm even believed that their common interest in his failings was a good foundation for a life-partnership.

Innocent of these developments, Esch had reckoned on a ceremonious and joyous welcome. Instead of that, Fräulein Erna actually shrank when he appeared in the doorway. Oh, she said, quickly pulling herself together, it was indeed kind of Herr Esch to let his friends see him again, oh, it was really kind of Herr Esch to condescend to remember them after not having even taken the trouble to send them a line. And then she said: "Who pays the piper calls the tune," with many other scathing remarks, so that Esch didn't even get as far as the lobby. Korn, however, who had heard their voices, came out of the living-room in his shirt-sleeves, and since he was of coarser fibre than his sister and had never bestowed a thought on Esch for the past two months, and thus was not offended by his silence, but would rather have been blankly astonished had it ever occurred to Esch to write to him, Korn was quite overjoyed to see him, for not only did he remain attached to all that he had once known, he also saw in the newly arrived Esch a source of entertainment and a welcome provider of money for the use of the empty room. And Korn shook his guest's hand with exclamations of delight, and was inviting him simply to walk into his old room again, which was waiting exclusively for him, when Fräulein Erna detained him and half turning to her brother said: she didn't know if that arrangement would do. This roused Korn's anger: "Why shouldn't it do as it did before? If I say it does, it does." Undoubtedly Esch, as a tactful man, should then have taken his leave with expressions of regret, but even if he had been tactful, which he was not, he was too intimate with the family to prevent curiosity from getting the upper hand of tact; what had been happening in his absence? And he simply stood rooted in astonishment. Meanwhile Fräulein Erna, who was also accustomed to plain speaking, satisfied his curiosity very quickly, for she hissed at her brother that a woman who was about to make a respectable marriage couldn't be expected to take a strange man under her roof; as it was, she had enough disgrace to put up with in that house, and if her future husband wasn't so magnanimous he would have made himself scarce already. Korn, in his vulgar way, retorted: "Papperlapap, shut your mouth. Esch is going to stay." But Fräulein Erna's hints drove all else out of Esch's head, and he cried: "Well, what a surprise; my heartiest congratulations, Fräulein Erna, who's the lucky man?" Fräulein Erna could do no less than accept his congratulations and intimate that she was on the point of coming to an agreement with Herr Lohberg. She took Esch's arm and led him into the living-room. Yes, and her fiancé, too, would be with them in a moment or so. And as they stood talking of Lohberg Korn had the brilliant idea of hiding Esch in a dark corner so that the unsuspecting Lohberg might get a shock when Esch suddenly took part in the conversation like a ghost.

When the bell rang in the lobby and Erna went to open the door, Esch obediently betook himself into a dark corner of the room. Korn, who remained sitting at the table, made imperious signs that he was to tuck himself still further in. For Korn was a man who set great store by technical perfection and was apt to grow angry if a hitch occurred in his arrangements. But it was not a fear of Korn's anger that made Esch hold himself so still in his corner, no, he was not at all the man to be scared into a corner, nor was it a place of humiliation and punishment for him; of his own free will he flattened himself closer to the wall, heeding little whether his sleeve grazed the distemper or not, for in that shadowy retreat he became strangely and unexpectedly aware of a desire to increase the distance between himself and the others at the table. The few minutes that elapsed before Lohberg entered did not suffice for him to think it out clearly, but it came

into his head that he was slipping once more into that curious isolation which was somehow connected with Mannheim, and which forbade him to make common cause with the others, an insistent isolation that was, however, so pleasant to him that it could not be too solitary, and if he could only have got far enough into his corner, would have made him a redeemed and noble hermit withdrawn from the world, a spirit commanding the company at the table, who were bound to the flesh. It was a state that could not have lasted long, for such reflections are indulged in only when time does not allow of their being thought out to a conclusion, not to say acted upon, and Esch had already forgotten them by the time that Lohberg came in according to programme and was so thoroughly confounded that he was even glad to see the newcomer. Esch certainly did not quite belong to the company, no more than Ilona did, but when they were all sitting round the table they were as one family and cross-questioned each other about many things. And since these questions soon reached money matters, Esch proudly drew out his note-case and laid 1561 marks and 50 pfennigs on the table. Fräulein Erna stretched out her hand delightedly to gather in, as she thought, her investment plus the profits, but when Esch explained that she would get as much in the end, but meanwhile had to share that sum with Lohberg since half of her money was still invested, she cried that that was a loss instead of a profit. And even when he tried to make it clear to her, she would not listen to reason, but swore she was not to be taken in, she could count as well as anybody: if you please—she got out paper and pencil —219 marks, 25 pfennigs, she made it, there it was in black and white, and raging, she thrust the paper under Esch's troubled nose. Lohberg kept his mouth shut, although as a business man he must have understood the situation well enough. Unwilling to get into trouble with his lady-love, the cowardly idiot. Esch said rudely: "I have my own sense of decency—apparently more than can be said of some people that are holding their tongues." And he grabbed Erna's arm, but not out of love; it was with most unloving anger and force that he banged her arm, paper and all, back on the table. Perhaps she had really understood the matter all along, or it might have been the firmness of Esch's grip; in short Fräulein Erna fell silent. Korn, hitherto a detached spectator, merely remarked that Teltscher, the Jew, must be a rogue. Well, then, retorted Esch, he should tell that to the police, for every rogue should be reported instead of having innocent men locked up. And since Lohberg's cowardly and disingenuous behaviour required punishment, he humiliated the fellow with the words: "As for innocent men, they're forgotten. Has Herr Lohberg, for instance, ever paid a visit to poor Martin?" Erna, who was still cowed but filled with healthy resentment, replied that she knew of other people who forgot their friends, yes, even ruined them, and that it was Herr Esch's business to bother about Martin. "That's what I've come here for," said Esch. "Aha," said Fräulein Erna, "if it hadn't been for that we should never have seen you again," and hesitatingly, almost timidly, as if only because she was bound not to abandon a good quarrel, she added: "nor our money either." Korn, however, who was a slow thinker, said: "You must have the Jew locked up."

That was, indeed, a remarkable solution of the problem, and although Esch had himself suggested it, he yearned to retort that it was merely a second-rate and partial solution compared with the much better, more radical, and as it were spiritual solution he now had an inkling of. What good would it do to lock up Teltscher for a month or two when Ilona would be exposed once more to knife-throwing? It struck him for the first time that Ilona wasn't present, although she really ought to have been there; almost as if it were intended that she should not see him until his task was accomplished. Anyhow, task or no task—here he was, promising to pay up profits in full, even while he was thinking of the great sacrifice he was to make! If the balance was ever to be truly struck the wrestling matches simply would have to be a dead loss. And since that implied that the wrathful Erna's money would be thrown away after all, he had a sense of guilt that was at bottom not at all unpleasant; but since it was no business of theirs he began to hector the others: so that was all the thanks he got, he was sorry he had ever troubled to bring the money, since that was how he was welcomed, but in any case he would write to Gernerth about the balance. He could do as he pleased, said Fräulein Erna spitefully. Then she would be good enough to write about it herself, for he had expressly disclaimed all responsibility. She certainly would not. Very well, then he would do it, for he was an honest man. "Indeed?" remarked Fräulein Erna. And so Esch demanded pen and paper and departed to his room without another look at those present.

In his room he strode up and down as was his habit when agitated. Then he began to whistle, so that the others might not think he was annoyed, and perhaps also because he was feeling lonely. Soon he heard Erna and Lohberg coming into the lobby. They were very subdued; obviously Lohberg, coward that he was, was still trembling and rolling his pale eyes helplessly from side to side. As so often, Lohberg's image called up Mother Hentjen's. She, too, was helpless now, and had to submit to everything, poor woman. He listened to hear if Lohberg and Erna were abusing him. A fine predicament Mother Hentjen had landed him in with her silly jealousy; he needn't have been here, he might have been in Badenweiler hours ago. But in the lobby all was quiet. Lohberg must have gone; and Esch sat down and wrote in his clerkly hand: "To Herr Alfred Gernerth, Theatre Manager, Alhambra Theatre, Cologne. Kindly remit my capital of 780.75 marks, in

return for which I shall send you a final quittance. Respectfully yours." With the letter in one hand and the inkpot and pen in the other he went straight across into Erna's room.

Erna, shuffling about in felt slippers, was just making down her bed, and Esch was amazed that she had managed to change her shoes so quickly. She was beginning to object to his intrusion when she remarked his equipment: "What are you doing with that rubbish?" He ordered her: "Sign here." "I'll sign no more for you.…" But meanwhile she had run her eye over the letter and went to the table with it: "All right," with a shrug; it wouldn't be of any use, the money was gone, thrown away, wasted, one would just have to put up with that; a man like Herr Esch, of course, didn't give a straw. Her abuse of him once more roused his curious feeling of guilt towards her; oh, what about it, he would help her to get her money, and he seized her hand to show her where to sign. When she tried to snatch it from him he was again annoyed; he grasped her hand more firmly with most unloving force, and for the second time it happened that Fräulein Erna grew silent and defenceless. At first he did not notice this, but merely guided her hand for the signature, then, however, her oblique lizard-like glance as she looked up at him struck him as an invitation. And when he embraced her she laid her cheek close to his breast. The fact that she did so did not trouble him at all; he was little disposed to ask whether it was merely the echo of her old fancy for him, or whether she wanted to revenge herself for Lohberg's lack of manliness, or—and that would have seemed most probable to Esch—whether she simply submitted because he happened to be there, because it was fated to happen, because they no longer had to wrangle over marriage. The situation had been cleared up: Erna had an admirer and he himself was going to America with Mother Hentjen; even his anger against Lohberg was allayed, and he almost felt a kind of tenderness for the idiot who was like Mother Hentjen in so many respects, and since Fräulein Erna must have taken over many of her wooer's qualities, being so intimate with him, to embrace Erna was in a way, although in a far-off way, like embracing a piece of Mother Hentjen, and couldn't be called unfaithfulness. Yet the recollection of their old quarrels was not yet quite banished, they still hesitated, there was a flash, as it were, of hostile chastity, and Esch was within an ace of returning to his own room, as of yore, without achieving anything. But of a sudden she said: "Hush!" and drew away from him: the main door outside had creaked, and Esch realized that Ilona had come in. They stood motionless. But when the footsteps outside died away and the door into the living-room, behind which Korn's bedroom lay, was locked, they too were locked in each other's arms.

As he crept later into his own bedroom he could not help thinking of Mother Hentjen, and that he had got off at Mannheim only to allay her jealous suspicions. That was all she got from her silly jealousy. Of course it had been only in joke, his threat to be unfaithful to her that very day. Yet it had turned out to be true, and it wasn't his fault. Besides, it wasn't really unfaithfulness; one could not so easily be unfaithful to a woman like that. All the same, it was a dirty thing to do. And why? Because he should have made a clean sweep of things and gone straight to the point; because in all decency he should have gone to Badenweiler instead of pandering to a woman's silly jealousy. That was what he got for it. A fine predicament, but it couldn't be helped now. Esch turned his face to the wall.

He opened his eyes and recognized his old room; the bright morning sun was streaming through the curtains, and like a lance the fear transfixed him: wasn't he late for the warehouse? but he remembered then that he was quit of the Central Rhine Shipping Company, that he was free and on holiday. Nobody had the power to waken him for judgment. He went on lying in bed, although it rather bored him, simply because he could lie as long as he chose. It was very likely, too, that Mother Hentjen would do him in, for she would never understand that he had been true to her after all; she would want to kill him, in any case, and that alone brought a comforting assurance of freedom. The man who is about to die is free, and he who is redeemed into freedom has taken death upon him. He could see the battlements of a castle on which a black flag drooped quietly, yet it might have been the Eiffel Tower, for who can distinguish the future from the past? In the park was a grave, the grave of a girl, the grave of a girl transfixed by a knife. In the face of death all things are permissible, free, gratis, so to speak, and strangely inconsequent. A man might make up to any woman in the street and ask her to sleep with him, and it would have the same pleasant inconsequence as sleeping with Erna, whom he would leave behind to-day or to-morrow when he journeyed into the darkness. He could hear her bustling about in the flat, the bony little creature, and he lay waiting for her to come in as she used to, for one must make hay while the sun shines. That the freedom to be unfaithful had first to be paid for by an act of unfaithfulness, and that all the same one desired to be killed for it, was certainly more than Mother Hentjen would ever understand; what did she know of such complicated balancing? Or how could she ever trace the falsifications that are so cunningly insinuated into the world, that only a skilled accountant could dare to die a redeemer's death? For the slightest error if overlooked could make the whole structure of freedom totter. At that point he heard Fräulein Erna's voice from the kitchen: "May I bring my lord his coffee now?" "No," shouted Esch, "I'll be there in a minute,"

sprang out of his bed, had his clothes on in a twinkling, drank his coffee and was down at the tramway stop in no time, himself astounded at the speed with which he had moved. The tram bound towards the prison had not yet arrived, and it was only because he had to wait that Esch wondered whether it was merely the thought of his visit to Martin that had driven him out of bed so quickly, or whether it was Erna's voice that was responsible. It wasn't a pleasant voice, especially when she was scolding, as on the previous evening. But Esch wasn't the man to be spurred by a sharp tongue. So it couldn't have been her voice, or else he would have been driven out of the flat long ago, as on that occasion, for instance, when she had called him into the kitchen to look at the sleeping Ilona. As for Ilona, he had no need to set eyes on her again, neither here nor anywhere else. And it would be best to keep these things at a distance, to refuse to admit that he had probably fled from Erna and her evil lusts, from that inconsequent lust in which he was to be involved henceforward, but which could not face the daylight, since night alone was the time for freedom.

At the jail he discovered that visitors were allowed only three times weekly; he must apply again next day. What was he to do? Go on to Badenweiler without further delay? He began to swear at this interference with the freedom of his movements. At length, however, he said: "Oh well, a reprieve," and the word "reprieve" stuck to him, haunting his mind, and gave him even a proud and comforting sense of brotherhood with a man so powerful as Bertrand, for the reprieve concerned both of them. He could not go off into the darkness without having seen Martin first, and it would have been ridiculous, even degrading, to let his visit to Mannheim mean nothing but a night with Erna. When a man takes a long journey he should leave no loose ends behind him, he should rather greet all his friends and say good-bye. So he went first down to the docks to look up his acquaintances in the warehouses and in the canteen. He felt almost like a long-lost relative returning from America, a little shy in case people should not know him again. For instance, it was quite possible that the watchman wouldn't even let him through the gates. But his reception was very amiable, perhaps because all those he met probably felt they no longer had a hold on him; the customs men at the gate welcomed him at once with light friendliness, and he had a short talk with them. Yes, they said, laughing, now that he wasn't with the Shipping Company he had no business there, and Esch said, he would soon let them see whether he had no business there, and they did not make the slightest attempt to prevent him from going in. Nobody hindered him from looking at all the sheds and cranes, warehouses and goods trucks, to his heart's content, and when he shouted in at the warehouse doors, the storekeepers and stevedores came out and stood like brothers before him. Yet he did not regret leaving it all, he merely impressed it with great clearness on his memory, sometimes caressing a goods wagon and sometimes a gangway, so that the feeling of dry wood clung to his hard palm. Only in the canteen was he disappointed; he looked for Korn but Korn was not there; Korn was stupid and kept out of the way, and Esch had to laugh, for he was no longer jealous of Ilona; Ilona would be spirited out of Korn's clutches into an inaccessible castle. So he merely drank a brandy with the policeman and betook himself along the accustomed street, no longer accustomed and yet more familiar than ever, till he came to a corner where the tobacco-shop regarded him expectantly, as if Lohberg had been waiting within for him with great impatience, waiting to have a chat.

Lohberg was really there behind his till with the large cigar-cutter in his hand, and as Esch came in he amiably laid the instrument down, for he had much to beg Esch's pardon for, and yet neither of them mentioned it, for Esch was ready to forgive and did not want Lohberg to burst into tears. Perhaps it was against the spirit of this agreement that Lohberg began to speak of Erna, but it was such a paltry infringement that Esch barely noticed it. Who could waken him until he chose? He was free! "She's a fine comrade," said Lohberg, "and we have many interests in common." And since Esch was free to say what he chose, he said: "Yes, she would never do you in." And he looked up at Lohberg's worried face that Mother Hentjen could have squashed merely with her thumb, and he was sorry for Erna because she wasn't big enough even to do that. Lohberg, however, smiled timidly, he was a little scared by the grisly jest, and under the eyes of his grim visitor he shrank and diminished. No, he was no fit opponent for a man like Esch; it is only the dead that are strong, though in life they may have looked like miserable snippets. Esch stalked about the shop like a ghost, sniffing the air, opening first one drawer and then another, and sliding the palm of his hand over the polished counter. He said: "When you're dead you'll be stronger than I am … but you're not the kind to be done in," he added contemptuously, for it struck him that even a dead Lohberg would be negligible; he knew the fellow too well, he would always be an idiot, and it was only those one didn't know, those who had never existed, who were omnipotent. Lohberg, however, still suspicious where women were concerned, said: "What do you mean? Do you mean would my widow be provided for? I've insured my life." That would certainly be a good reason for poisoning him off, said Esch, and could not help laughing so loudly that the laughter somehow stuck in his throat and hurt him. Mother Hentjen, now, that was a woman. She would have no truck with poison, she would simply spit a man like Lohberg on a pin as if he were a beetle. She was a woman to be regarded with consideration and respect,

and it amazed Esch that he had ever thought of comparing her with Lohberg. And he was a little touched, because for all that she put on an air of weakness, and was probably quite right in doing so. Lohberg's skin prickled, and he rolled his pale eyes: "Poison?" he said, as if it were the first time he had ever heard the word, though it was always on his tongue, or at least as if it were the first time he had actually understood it. Esch's laughter became condescending and somewhat scornful: "Oh, she won't poison you, Erna's not that kind of woman." "No," said Lohberg, "she has a heart of gold; she wouldn't hurt a fly…." "Or spit a beetle on a pin," said Esch. "I'm sure she wouldn't," said Lohberg. "But if you're ever unfaithful to her she'll do you in all the same," threatened Esch. "I'll never be unfaithful to my wife," announced the idiot. And suddenly Esch realized, and it was a pleasant and illuminating realization, why he had thought of comparing Lohberg and Mother Hentjen: Lohberg was merely a woman, after all, a kind of natural freak, and that was why it didn't matter if he slept with Erna: even Ilona had slept in Erna's bed. Esch rose to his feet, stood firmly and robustly on his legs, and stretched his arms like a man newly awakened from sleep or nailed to a cross. He felt strong, steadfast and well endowed, a man whom it would be worth while to kill. "Either him or me," he said, and felt that the world was at his feet. "Either him or me," he repeated, striding about the shop. "What do you mean?" asked Lohberg. "I don't mean you," replied Esch, showing his strong white teeth: "As for you, you're going to marry Erna," for that seemed right and proper: the fellow had a fine and highly polished shop, complete with life-insurance policy, and should marry little Erna and go on living in peace; he himself, on the other hand, had wakened up and accepted the task laid upon him. And since Lohberg went on singing Erna's praises, Esch said what was expected of him, and what the other had long been waiting for as a sign from on high: "Oh, you and your Salvation Army twaddle … if you hum and haw much longer she'll slip through your fingers. It's high time you took hold of her, you milksop." "Yes," said Lohberg, "yes, I think the time of probation is now fulfilled." The shop looked bright and friendly in the light of that dull summer day; its yellow-oak fittings made a solid and enduring impression, and beside the patent till lay a ledger with neatly added columns. Esch sat down at Lohberg's desk and wrote to Mother Hentjen that he had arrived safely and was well on the way to settle all his business.

His second night in Erna's bed he regarded as a formality that a free man was entitled to comply with. They had had a friendly talk about her marriage to Lohberg, and made love to each other almost tenderly and sentimentally, as if they had never fought tooth and nail. And after that long and wakeful night he rose with the pleasant feeling of having helped Erna and Lohberg to their joint happiness. For every man has many potentialities in him, and according to the chain of logic he throws round them he can convince himself that they are good or bad.

Immediately after breakfast he started for the prison. In Lohberg's shop he bought some cigarettes for Martin; nothing else occurred to him. The heat was sweltering, and Esch could not help thinking of that afternoon in Goarshausen on which he had pitied Martin because of the heat. In the prison he was shown into the visiting-room, which had barred windows giving on the bare prison yard, across which the yellow-washed buildings threw sharply cut shadows. The yard looked as if the executioner's block might well be set up in the middle of it, that block by which the criminal had to kneel and wait for the keen edge of the axe that was to sever his head. When Esch had come to this conclusion he did not want to look at the yard any longer, and turned away from the window. He examined the room. In the middle stood a yellow-painted table with splashes of ink on it that told of previous use in an office; there were also one or two chairs. The room was like an oven although it was in the shadow, for the early morning sun had streamed into it and the windows were shut. Esch became drowsy; he was alone and he sat down; he was left to wait.

Then he heard footsteps in the paved corridor and the clacking of Martin's crutches. Esch rose to his feet as if to greet a superior. But Martin came in exactly as if he were coming into Mother Hentjen's. If an orchestrion had been at hand he would have hobbled over to it and set it going. He looked round the room and seemed pleased that Esch was alone, went up to him and shook his hand. " 'Morning, Esch, good of you to come and see me." He leaned his crutches against the table, just as he always did in Mother Hentjen's, and sat down. "Come on, Esch, sit down too." The warder who had escorted him was reminiscent of Korn in his uniform; he had remained standing by the door according to regulations. "Will you not take a seat too, Herr Warder? There's nobody coming and I certainly won't try to escape." The man muttered something about the service regulations, but he came up to the table and laid down his huge bunch of keys. "So," said Martin, "now we're all comfortable," and then they were silent all three, sitting round the table staring at the notches in it. Martin was rather yellower than usual; Esch did not dare to ask how his health was. But Martin could not help laughing at the embarrassed silence and said: "Well, August, tell me all the news from Cologne, how's Mother Hentjen, and everybody else?"

In spite of his burning cheeks Esch felt himself redden, for suddenly it struck him that he had exploited

the prisoner's absence to steal his friends from him. Nor did he know whether he should give them away before the warder. After all, few people care to be mentioned in connection with a criminal in the visiting-room of a prison. He said: "They're all getting on well."

Probably Martin had understood his constraint, for he did not insist on a more exhaustive answer, but asked: "And you yourself?"

"I'm on my way to Badenweiler."

"To take the waters?"

Esch felt that Martin had no need to make fun of him. He answered dryly: "To see Bertrand."

"Upon my soul, you're getting on! He's a fine chap, Bertrand."

Esch was not certain if Martin was still joking or being somehow ironical. A fine sodomite was what Bertrand was, that was the truth. But he couldn't say that in front of the warder. He muttered: "If he was really a fine chap you wouldn't be sitting here."

Martin looked a question.

"Well, you're innocent, aren't you?"

"I? I have it in black and white, and sworn to in a court of law, that I've already lost my innocence several times."

"Oh, stop making silly jokes! If Bertrand's such a fine chap he need only be told exactly what has happened to you. Then he'll see to it that you're let out."

"Is it you that's going to enlighten him? Is that why you're making for Badenweiler?" Martin laughed and stretched his hand out over the table to Esch: "My dear August, what an idea! It's a good thing you won't find him there.…"

Esch said quickly: "Where is he?"

"Oh, he's still on his travels, in America or somewhere."

Esch was dumbfounded: so Bertrand was in America! Had got there first, was basking before him in the light of freedom. And although Esch had always suspected that the greatness and liberty of that far country had a very significant though not fully comprehensible connection with the greatness and freedom of the man he could never reach, he felt now as if Bertrand's journey to America had annulled for ever his own plan of emigration. And because of this, and because everything was so remote and inaccessible, he fell into a rage with Martin: "A chairman of a company can get easily enough to America … but Italy would do him just as well."

Martin said peaceably: "Well, Italy, then, for all I care."

Esch reflected whether he should ask in the inquiry office of the Central Shipping where Bertrand was to be found. But suddenly that seemed to him superfluous, and he said: "No, he's in Badenweiler."

Martin laughed: "Well, you may be right, but even so they won't let you in … is there some girl or other behind all this, what?"

"I'll soon find ways and means of getting in," said Esch threateningly.

Martin scented trouble: "Don't do anything silly, August, don't worry the man; he's a decent chap and should be respected."

Obviously he has no idea of all that's hidden behind Bertrand, thought Esch, but he did not dare to mention it and merely said: "They're all decent enough; even Nentwig," and after some consideration he added: "All dead men are decent too, but one can only find out what that decency was worth by looking at the legacies they leave behind them."

"What do you mean?"

Esch shrugged his shoulders: "Nothing, I was just saying … yes, that it doesn't matter in the long run whether a man's decent or not; he's always decent on one side; and that doesn't come into question; the question is what did he do?" And he added angrily: "That's the only way to keep yourself from being at sixes and sevens."

Martin shook his head in amusement mingled with sorrow: "Look here, August, you have a friend here in Mannheim who's always prating about poison. Seems to me he must have poisoned you.…"

But Esch continued undismayed: "For we don't know black from white any longer. Everything's topsy-turvy. You don't even know what's past from what's still going on.…"

Martin laughed again: "And I know even less what's going to happen."

"Do be serious for once. You're sacrificing yourself for the future; that's what you told me yourself … that's the only thing left to do, to sacrifice oneself for the future and atone for all that is past; a decent man must sacrifice himself or else there's no order in the world."

The prison warder's suspicions were aroused: "You mustn't make revolutionary speeches here."

Martin said: "This man's no revolutionary, Herr Warder. You're more likely to be one yourself."

Esch was astounded that his remarks could be so construed. So he had turned into a Social Democrat, had

he? Well, so be it! And obstinately he went on: “Let them be revolutionary, for all I care. Anyhow, you yourself have always preached that it doesn’t matter whether a capitalist is a decent fellow or not, for it’s as a capitalist he has to be opposed and not as a man.”

Martin said: “Look at that, Herr Warder, do you think we should be allowed visitors? This man will poison me through and through with his heresies, and me just newly regenerated.” And he turned to Esch: “You’re the same old muddlehead, my dear August.”

The warder said: “Duty’s duty,” and since he was in any case too hot, he looked at his watch and announced that their time was up.

Martin took his crutches: “All right, lead on.” He gave Esch his hand. “And let me tell you again, August, don’t do anything silly. And many thanks for everything.”

Esch was not prepared for such a sudden break-up. He kept Martin’s hand in his own and hesitated about shaking hands with the hostile warder. Then he offered the man his hand after all, because they had been sitting at the same table, and Martin nodded his approval. Then Martin departed, and Esch was again amazed because he went exactly as if he were only leaving Mother Hentjen’s, and yet he was going into a prison cell! It seemed indeed as if nothing that happened in the world mattered at all. Yet there was nothing that wasn’t significant: one had only to force it to be so.

Outside the prison gate Esch drew a deep breath; he dusted himself as if to convince himself of his own existence, discovered the cigarettes he had intended for Martin, and once more felt that inexplicable and terrible rage against him, and once more his mouth was filled with curses. He even called Martin a ridiculous tub-thumper, a demagogue, as they said, although there was really nothing he could reproach the man with except, at the very most, that he had carried himself as though he were the chief figure in the drama, while there were much more important characters.… But that was what demagogues were like.

Esch took a tram back to the town, was irritated by the sight of the conductor’s uniform, and collected his things from Fräulein Erna’s flat. She received him with every mark of affection. And in his rage at the confusion of the world he treated her overtures with scorn. Thereupon he took a brief farewell and hurried to the station to catch the night train for Müllheim.

> *When desires and aims meet and merge, when dreams begin to foreshadow the great moments and crises of life, the road narrows then into darker gorges, and the prophetic dream of death enshrouds the man who has hitherto walked dreaming in sleep: all that has been, all aims, all desires, flit past him once more as they do before the eyes of a dying man, and one can well-nigh call it chance if that road does not end in death.*

The man who from afar off yearns for his wife or merely for the home of his childhood has begun his sleepwalking.

Many preparations, it may be, have already been made, only he has not yet noticed them. As, for instance, when it strikes him on the way to the station that houses are composed of regular rows of bricks, that doors are made of sawn planks and windows of rectangular panes of glass. Or when he remembers the editor and the demagogue, both of whom pretend to know the difference between right and left, although that is known only to women, and by no means to all women. But a man cannot always be thinking of such matters, and so he quietly drinks a glass of beer in the station.

Yet when he sees the train for Müllheim come roaring in, that great, long serpent darting so surely towards its goal, he is again struck down, suddenly struck by doubt of the engine’s reliability, for it might take the wrong road; struck by the fear that he, with evident and important duties to fulfil on earth, might be diverted from these duties and cast adrift perhaps even as far as America.

In his perplexity he would gladly approach some uniformed official, as unpractised travellers do, and ask a question, but the platform is so extended, so immeasurably long and bare, that he can scarcely race along it, and must think himself lucky, breathless maybe but still lucky, to reach the train at all, whatever its destination. Of course he strives to make out the names of the towns posted on the carriages, but soon realizes that it is a useless effort, for the names are mere words. And the traveller hesitates a little uncertainly before his carriage.

Uncertainty and breathlessness are quite enough to make a hasty-tempered man swear, still more when, startled by the signal for departure, he has to scramble up the inconvenient steps at a breakneck pace into the carriage, and barks his shin on one of them. He swears, he swears at the steps and their awkward construction, he swears at fate. Yet behind this rudeness there lurks a more relevant and even more maddening recognition, which the man could formulate if his mind were awake: mere human contrivances

all these things are, these steps fitted to the bending and stretching of the human leg, that immeasurably long platform, these signboards with words upon them, and the locomotive's whistle, and the glittering steel rails—no end to the human contrivances, and all of them engendered in barrenness.

Vaguely the traveller feels that by such reflections he lifts himself above the trivial daily round, and he would like to stamp them on his mind for the rest of his life. For though reflections of that sort might be deemed general to the human race, yet they are more accessible to travellers, especially to hasty-tempered travellers, than to stay-at-homes who think of nothing, not even if they climb up and down their stairs ever so often daily. The stay-at-home does not observe that he is surrounded by things of human manufacture, and that his thoughts are merely manufactured in the same way. He sends his thoughts out, as if they were trusty and capable commercial travellers, on a journey round the world, and he fancies that thus he brings the world back into his parlour and into his own transactions.

But the man who sends himself out instead of his thoughts has lost this premature sense of security: his temper rises against everything that is of human manufacture, against the engineers who have designed the steps precisely to those measurements and not to others, against the demagogues who prate of justice, order and liberty as if they could rearrange the world according to their theories, against all dogmatists who claim to know better than others his anger rises, now that there is dawning within him the knowledge of ignorance.

He is painfully aware of a liberty allowing things to be otherwise. Imperceptibly the words with which things are labelled have lapsed into uncertainty: it is as if all words were orphan strays. Uncertainly the traveller walks up the long corridor of the carriage, a little bewildered to see glass windows like those in houses, and with his hand he touches their cool surfaces. The man who takes a journey can thus fall easily into a state of detached irresponsibility. And since the train goes roaring on at full speed, apparently darting towards a goal, apparently rushing into irresponsibility, and can be stopped in its career by nothing less than the emergency brake, and since beneath his very feet it is hurrying him off with great dispatch, the traveller who has not yet lost his conscience in the painful liberty of the open day makes an attempt to turn and walk in the opposite direction. But he arrives nowhere, for here there is nothing but the future.

Iron wheels roll between him and the good firm earth, and the traveller in the corridor thinks of ships with long passages in which cabin is ranged beside cabin, floating on top of a mountain of water high over the sea-bottom that is the earth. Sweet, never-to-be-fulfilled hope! what boots it to crawl into the belly of a ship when nothing but murder can bring liberty?—never, ah, never will the ship anchor beside the castle in which one's loved one dwells. The traveller in the corridor gives up his perambulations, and while he pretends to be looking at the landscape and the distant mountains he presses his nose flat against the window-pane as he used to do when he was a child.

Murder and Liberty, as closely akin as Birth and Death! And the man who is pitched headlong into liberty is as orphaned as the murderer who cries for his mother as he is led to the scaffold. In the rushing train only the future is real, for every moment is given to a different place, and the people in the carriages are as content as if they knew that they were being snatched from expiation. Those who are left behind on the station platform have made a last effort, by waving handkerchiefs and uttering cries, to rouse the conscience of their departing friends and summon them back to their duties, but the travellers cling to their irresponsibility, shut the windows on the pretext that the draught might give them stiff necks, and unpack the eatables which they need not now share with anyone.

Some of them have stuck their tickets in their hat-bands so that their innocence may be visible from afar, but the majority hunt with feverish haste for their tickets when the voice of conscience is heard and the uniformed official appears. The man who is thinking of murder is soon detected, and it avails him little that like a child he is gorging himself on a chaotic mixture of food and sweetmeats; it remains a meal in the shadow of the block.

They are sitting on benches which the designers, with shameless and perhaps premature knowingness, have made to fit the twice-curved form of the seated body, they are sitting eight in a row, packed tight in a wooden cage, they roll their heads and hear the creaking of wood and the light squeak of rods above the rolling, pounding wheels. Those facing the engine despise the others who are looking back into the past; they are afraid of the draught, and when the door is thrown open they fear that someone might come in and make them look over their shoulders. For the man whose head is turned the wrong way can no longer judge between guilt and atonement, he doubts that two and two make four, doubts that he is his own mother's child and not a changeling. So even their toes are carefully pointed forward in the direction of the business affairs that are to occupy them. For the occupations they follow bind them together in a community,—a community that has no power but is full of uncertainty and malice.

The mother alone can assure her child that he is no changeling. Travellers, however, and stray orphans, all those who have burned their bridges behind them, are no longer certain how they stand. Pitched

headlong into freedom they must build up a new order and justice for themselves; they will no longer listen to the sophistries of engineers and demagogues, they hate the human factor in all political and technical constructions, but they do not dare to rebel against the stupidities of a thousand years and to invoke that terrible revolution of knowledge in which two and two will no longer be capable of addition. For there is no one present to assure them of their once lost and now recovered innocence, no one on whose bosom they may lay their heads, fleeing away into forgetfulness from the freedom of the open day.

Anger sharpens the wits. The travellers have carefully arranged their luggage on the rack, and now they plunge into angry and critical discussion of the political institutions of the Empire, of public order and the nature of law; they cavil at existing things and institutions with nice precision, although in words of whose reliability they are no longer sure. And in the bad conscience of their new liberty they are afraid lest they may hear the terrible crash of a railway accident, which might spit them bodily on the iron rods of the carriage. One is always reading about that kind of thing in the newspapers.

Yet they are like people who have been roused too soon from sleep into freedom, roused to catch the train in time. So their words become more and more uncertain and drowsy, and soon all conversation dies away in an indistinguishable muttering. One or the other remarks, indeed, that he would rather shut his eyes than go on staring at the racing landscape, but his fellow-travellers, escaping into their dreams, decline to listen. They doze into slumber with their fists clenched and their coats drawn over their faces, and their dreams are filled with rage against engineers and demagogues who, strong in the knowledge of infamy, call things by names that are false, so shamelessly false that the angry dreamer must give new and tentative names to everything, yet wistfully yearns that his mother could tell him the true names, and so make the world as secure as a settled home.

Everything is too remote and too near, as it is in childhood, and the traveller who has committed himself to the train and from afar off yearns for his wife, or merely for the home of his childhood, is like one whose sight is beginning to fail him, and feels stirring within him the terror of blindness. Many things around him are clouded, at least he thinks that they are as soon as he has covered his face with his coat, and yet a new knowledge burgeons within him, a knowledge that may have lain unnoticed for some time. He has begun his sleepwalking. He still follows the road laid down by the engineers, but he walks only on the extreme verge of it, so that one cannot but fear that he will be precipitated headlong. He still hears the voice of the demagogue, but it comes as a mere unmeaning murmur. He stretches his arms sideways and forwards like a poor tight-rope dancer who, high above solid earth, knows of a better support. Tranced and compelled his captive soul presses on, and the sleeper soars upwards to where the pinions of the loved one are ruffled by his breath like the down that is laid on a dead man's lips, and he desires to be asked, like a child, what his name is, so that in the arms of his woman, breathing deeply of home, he may sink into dreamlessness. He is not yet at a great height, but he is already on the first pinnacle of aspiration, for he knows no longer what his name may be.

> *The desire that someone should come to pay the debt of sacrificial death and redeem the world to a new innocence: this eternal dream of mankind may rise to murder, this eternal dream may rise to clairvoyance. All knowledge wavers between the dreamt wish and the foreshadowing dream, all knowledge of the redeeming sacrifice and the kingdom of salvation.*

Esch spent the night in Müllheim. When he climbed into the little local train to Badenweiler the vaporous light of morning still lay on the green hills of the Black Forest. The world looked clear and near like a dangerous toy. The engine was so short of breath that one felt one wanted to let out a few hooks at its throat; but whether it was pulling the train rapidly or slowly it was impossible to tell. In spite of this Esch trusted himself to it unthinkingly. When it stopped the trees greeted him with a greater friendliness than ever before, and caressed by soft and fragrant airs a kiosk arose beside the railway buildings offering a large assortment of pretty picture postcards. Any of them would have looked effective in Mother Hentjen's collection, and Esch chose one, a lovely card showing the Schlossberg, stuck it in his pocket, and sought a shadowy seat that he might write in peace. But he did not write. He remained calmly sitting, like one who has nothing more to trouble about, and his hands rested placidly on his knees. He sat like this for a long time, gazing through half-closed lids at the green leaves of the trees, sat so long that when at last he walked through the untroubled streets and saw human beings going to and fro, in his astonishment he could not tell how he came to be there. Before a house stood a sinister motor-car, and Esch regarded it closely to see whether it was big enough to sleep in. He looked round lazily at everything, for he felt the security and relaxation of the horseman who has reached his goal, and, turning in his saddle, sees the others still a long

way behind; all his tension fell from him, and quite at his ease, almost hesitatingly, he addressed himself to the last stretch, ardently longing, indeed, for some unexpectedly high and difficult obstacle to rise before him ere his goal was reached and he could grasp his secure triumph. So it was almost a matter for grief to him—and propitious as the day was, it was unpropitious to grief—that he should be making towards Bertrand's house with such certainty: without knowing the place and without asking, he knew all the turns to take. He climbed the gently winding avenue; the breath of the woods met him, caressed his brow, caressed his skin beneath his collar and shirt-cuffs, and to receive the coolness he took his hat in his hand and opened the buttons of his waistcoat. Now he went in through a park gate, almost unaffected by the discovery that the estate did not in the least resemble the grandiose vision that had floated before him in his dream pictures. And although in none of the high windows was Ilona to be seen in shimmering spangles, the more lovely foil to this lovely scene, already at her goal and languidly resting there, yet, though this was a deep disappointment, the dream picture remained unscathed, and it was as though what he saw palpably before him now were only a symbolical representation erected for a momentary and practical purpose, a dream within a dream. At the top of the sloping deep green sward, which lay in the morning shadow, stood the house, a villa executed in a severe and solid style, and as though the wayward and evanescent coolness of the morning, as though the symbolism of the scene wished once more to duplicate itself, at the end of the slope rose an almost soundless fountain, and its waters were like a crystalline draught which one longed to drink simply because they were so limpid. Out of the lodge covered with honeysuckle which stood behind the gate appeared a man in grey who asked what Esch wanted. The silver buttons on his coat were not the appurtenances of a livery or uniform, for they glittered softly and coolly, as though they had been sewed on expressly for this shimmering morning, and if yesterday Esch had still felt for a moment his self-confidence sinking, and doubted whether after all he would manage to penetrate to the Chairman, now all his doubts vanished, and he felt he might almost claim to belong to those who could go out and in here without hindrance. The behaviour of the lodge-keeper, who made no attempt to enter his name and business in a duplicate block, did not even surprise Esch, nor did it occur to him that perhaps it would have been more fitting for him to wait at the door; falling in step with the man he walked on by his side, and the man silently allowed it. They entered a cool and shadowy ante-room, and while the other vanished through one of the many white varnished doors, which softly opened before and softly closed behind him, Esch felt the soft yielding carpet under his feet and waited for the messenger, who presently returned and led him through several apartments, until they came to another door, at which with a bow his conductor left him. And although he had now no more need of a guide, it seemed to him that it would have been more fitting, and even more desirable, had the flight of rooms extended for a long distance still, perhaps into eternity, into an unattainable eternity guarding the inner shrine, guarding the presence chamber so to speak; and he almost imagined that in some miraculous and unseemly and clandestine way he had indeed traversed an endless flight of endless rooms when he now found himself in the presence of this man who held out his hand to him. And although Esch knew that it was Bertrand, and that there could be no doubt about it, now or at any time, yet it seemed to him that this man was only the visible symbol of another, the reflected image of someone more essential and perhaps greater who remained in concealment, so simply and smoothly, so effortlessly did everything go. And now he was looking at this man, who was clean-shaven like an actor and yet was not an actor; the man's face was youthful, and his wavy hair was white. There were a great many books in the room, and Esch sat down beside the writing-table as if he were in a doctor's consulting-room. He heard the man's voice, and it was sympathetic like that of a doctor: "What brings you to me?"

And the dreamer heard his own voice saying softly: "I'm going to hand you over to the police."

"Oh! What a pity!" the reply came so quietly that Esch too did not dare after this to raise his voice. Almost as if speaking to himself he repeated:

"To the police."

"Why, do you hate me?"

"Yes," Esch lied, and was ashamed of the lie.

"That isn't true, my friend, you like me very well."

"An innocent man is sitting in prison in your place."

Esch felt that the other was smiling, and he saw Martin before him, smiling as he sometimes did in speaking. And the same smile was now in Bertrand's voice:

"But, my dear boy, in that case you should have given me in charge long ago."

One could make nothing of this man. Esch said defiantly: "I'm not a murderer."

Then Bertrand actually laughed, softly and inaudibly, and because the morning was so lovely, yes because the morning itself seemed so lovely, Esch could not summon up the annoyance natural in a man who is laughed at; he forgot that he had just spoken of murder, and had it not been unseemly in the

circumstances he would have liked also to join in Bertrand's soft laughter. And although the two ideas he now had in his head did not really go together, or if they did, then only in some relation difficult to grasp, he summoned up all his seriousness and went on:

"No, I'm no murderer; you must set Martin free."

But Bertrand, who evidently understood everything, seemed to understand this too, though his voice, more serious now, still kept its tone of reassuring and light gaiety: "But Esch, how can anybody be so cowardly? Does one need a pretext for a murder?"

Now the word had been uttered again, even if it had only flitted by like a silent, dark-hued butterfly. And Esch thought that there was really no need for Bertrand to die now, seeing that Hentjen was already dead in any case. But then like a soft and clear illumination came the thought that a human being might die twice. And Esch said, marvelling that this thought had not come to him before: "You're at liberty to fly, of course," and he added temptingly, "to America."

It was as though Bertrand were not speaking to him: "You know, my dear fellow, that I shan't fly. I've waited too long already for this moment."

And now Esch felt a rush of love for this man who stood so much higher than himself and yet talked to him of death as though to a friend, to him, an obscure employee in his business and an orphan to boot. Esch was glad that he had kept the firm's books so well and rendered faithful and honest service. And he felt afraid to say that he understood how things stood with Bertrand, or to beg Bertrand to do him in: he simply nodded his head understandingly; Bertrand said: "No one stands so high that he dare judge his fellows, and no one is so depraved that his eternal soul can lose its claim to reverence."

Then Esch saw everything more clearly than ever before, saw too that he had deceived himself and others, for it was as though the knowledge that Bertrand possessed about him now flowed back to him: no, never had he believed that this man would set Martin free. But Bertrand, both judge and judged, said with a slightly disdainful wave of the hand: "And if I were to fulfil your craven hope and your unfulfillable condition, Esch, wouldn't we both feel ashamed of ourselves? You, who in that case would be only an ordinary little blackmailer, and I, for delivering myself into the hands of such a blackmailer?"

And although nothing escaped Esch, the overwakeful dreamer, neither the somewhat contemptuous gesture of the hand, nor the ironical curl that could now be seen on Bertrand's smiling lips, yet the hope refused to leave him that in spite of everything Bertrand would fulfil the condition or at least fly: Esch clung to this hope, for suddenly the fear had arisen in him that with Herr Hentjen's second death his desire for Mother Hentjen might die too. But that was his private affair, and to make Bertrand's fate dependent on it seemed to him as despicable as to extort money from Bertrand, and besides it did not accord with the purity of the morning. So he said: "There's no other way out—I must give you in charge."

And Bertrand replied: "Everyone must fulfil his dream, whether it be unhallowed or holy. Otherwise he will never partake of freedom."

Esch did not wholly understand this, and to reassure himself he said: "I must give you in charge. Otherwise things will get worse and worse."

"Yes, my dear chap, otherwise things will get worse and worse, and we must try to prevent that. Of us two I have certainly the easier part; I need only go away. The stranger never suffers, he is released from everything,—it is the one who remains behind in the coils that suffers."

Esch thought he could see again the ironical curl on Bertrand's lips: fatally entangled in the coils of that cold remoteness Harry Köhler could not but perish miserably, yet Esch could not feel angry with the man who brought such ruin on others. Indeed he too would have liked to dismiss the matter with a disdainful wave of the hand, and it was almost like a corroboration of Bertrand's words when he said: "If there was no expiation, there would be no past, present, or future."

"Oh, Esch, you make my heart heavy. You hope for too much. Time has never been reckoned yet from the day of death: it has always begun with the day of birth."

Esch, too, had a heavy heart. He was waiting for this man to give the command for the black flag to be hoisted on the battlements, and he thought: "He must make way for the other who will begin the new dispensation of Time."

But Bertrand did not seem to be saddened by the thought, for he said casually, as though in parenthesis: "Many must die, many must be sacrificed, so that a path may be prepared for the loving redeemer and judge. And only through his sacrificial death can the world be redeemed to a new innocence. But first the Antichrist must come—the mad and dreamless Antichrist. First the world must become quite empty, must be emptied of everything in it as by a vacuum cleaner—nothingness."

That was illuminating, like everything that Bertrand said, so illuminating and frank that the challenge to imitate his ironical tone became almost an obligation, almost a token of acknowledgment: "Yes, order must be established, so that one can begin at the beginning."

Yet even while he said this Esch felt ashamed, ashamed of the sarcastic inflection of his voice; he was afraid lest Bertrand should laugh at him again, for he felt naked in front of him, and he was grateful when Bertrand merely corrected him in a mild voice: “Your order, Esch, is only murder and counter-murder—the order of the machine.”

Esch thought: “If he were to keep me here with him there would be order: everything would be forgotten, and cloudlessly the days would flow by in peace and clarity; but he will cast me out.” And of course he would have to go, if Ilona were here. So he said: “Martin sacrificed himself, and yet he redeemed nobody.”

Bertrand made a slight, somewhat contemptuous, hopeless gesture with his hand: “No one can see another in the darkness, Esch, and that cloudless clarity of yours is only a dream. You know that I cannot keep you beside me, much as you fear your loneliness. We are a lost generation. I too can only go about my business.”

It was only natural that Esch should feel deeply stricken, and he said: “Nailed to the cross.”

Now Bertrand smiled again, and because he had been repulsed, Esch could almost have wished Bertrand to die at that moment if the smile had not been so friendly, friendly and subdued, like Bertrand’s words which divined everything: “Yes, Esch,—nailed to the cross. And in the hour of final loneliness pierced by the spear and anointed with vinegar. And only then can that darkness break in under cover of which the world must fall into dissolution so that it may become again clear and innocent, that darkness in which no man’s path can meet another’s—and where, even if we walk side by side, we will not hear each other, but will forget each other, as you too, my last dear friend, will forget what I say to you now, forget it like a dream.”

He pressed a button and gave orders. Then they went into the garden which stretched away illimitably behind the house, and Bertrand showed Esch his flowers and his horses. Dark butterflies flitted silently from flower to flower, and the horses made no sound. Bertrand had a buoyant step as he walked through his property, and yet it sometimes seemed to Esch as though this light-footed man should be walking on crutches, for the heavens were in eclipse. Then they sat down together and ate; silver and wine and fruit decked the table, and they were like two friends who knew all about each other. When they had eaten Esch knew that the hour of parting was near, for the evening might unexpectedly overtake them. Bertrand accompanied him to the steps which led to the garden, and there the great red motor-car with the smooth red-leather seats, which were still hot with the rays of the midday sun, was already waiting. And now that their fingers touched in farewell, Esch felt an overwhelming desire to bow over Bertrand’s hand and kiss it. But the driver of the car sounded his horn loudly, so that the guest had hastily to climb in. Hardly was the car in motion before a powerful, yet warm wind arose, so that house and garden seemed to be whirled away, and this wind did not subside until they reached Müllheim, where a lighted train with its engine snorting awaited the traveller. It was Esch’s first drive in a motor-car, and it was very beautiful.

> *Great is the fear of him who awakens. He returns with less certainty to his waking life, and he fears the puissance of his dream, which though it may not have borne fruit in action has yet grown into a new knowledge. An exile from dream, he wanders in dream. And even if he carries in his pocket a picture postcard which he can gaze at, it does not avail him: before the Judgment he stands condemned a false witness.*

Often it may happen that a human being never notices that the lineaments of his desire have altered in the course of a few hours. The change may consist merely in certain fine distinctions, nuances of light and shade which our average traveller is totally unaware of, yet his longing for home has unexpectedly been transformed into a longing for the promised land, and even if his heart is full of a vague dread, a dread of the darkness of his quiescent, waiting home, yet his eyes are already filled with an invisible radiance which has appeared from somewhere, invisible as yet, although one can divine that it is the radiance beyond the ocean, where the dark mists thin away: but if the mists should rise, then the radiant outspread rows of fields over there come into sight, and the gently sloping lawns, a land in which eternal morning is so embedded that the fearful traveller begins to forget women. The land is uninhabited, and the few colonists are strangers. They hold no intercourse with one another; every man lives alone in his stronghold. They go about their business and till the fields, sow and weed. The arm of justice cannot reach them, for they have neither rights nor laws. In their motor-cars they drive over the prairies and the virgin land, which has never yet been traversed by roads, and all that drives them on is their insatiable longing. Even when the colonists have made a home there they still feel strangers; for their longing is a longing for things afar off, and is directed towards far distances of an ever greater, never attainable radiance. And that is the strange thing

about them, for they are a western people, that is to say a people whose gaze is turned towards the evening as though they awaited there not the night but the gates of dawn. Whether they seek this radiance because they wish to think clearly and definitely, or simply because they are afraid of the dark, remains disputable. All that is known is that they either settle where the forests are sparse, or clear the trees to make a spacious park; for though they love the coolness of the grove, they tell each other that they must protect their children from its uncanny gloom. Now whether this be true or not, it shows in any case that the ways of colonists are not so rude as those of colonists and pioneers are generally supposed to be, but resemble rather the ways of women, as their longing resembles the longing of women, which though ostensibly a longing for the man they love, is in reality a longing for the promised land into which he shall lead them out of their darkness. Yet one must be cautious in expressing such generalizations: for the colonists easily take offence, and then they withdraw into a still more impenetrable solitude. In the prairies, however, in the grass-lands which they love, rich in hills and veined with cooling streams, they are a cheerful race, although they are too shamefast to sing. Such is the life of the colonists, remote from care, and they seek it beyond the ocean. They die lightly and still young, even should their hair be already grey, for their longing is a perpetual rehearsal of farewell. They are as proud as Moses when he beheld the promised land, he alone in his divine longing, and he alone forbidden to enter. And often one may see among them the same somewhat hopeless and somewhat contemptuous gesture of the hand as in Moses on the mount. For irrevocably behind them lies the home of their race, and inaccessibly before them stretches the distance, and the man whose longing has been transformed without his knowledge sometimes feels like one whose sufferings have been merely deadened, and who can never fully forget them. Vain hope! For who can tell whether he is pressing towards the blessed fields, or straying like a lost orphan? Even though one's grief for the irretrievable becomes less and less the farther one presses into the promised land, even if many things thin away into vapour in the deepening radiance, and one's grief too becomes lighter, more and more transparent, perhaps even invisible, yet it does not vanish any more than the longing of the man in whose sleep-wandering the world passes away, dissolving into a memory of the darkness of woman, desirous and maternal, where at last it is only a painful echo of what had once been. Vain hope, and often groundless arrogance. A lost generation. And so many of the colonists, even when they appear cheerful and untroubled, suffer remorse of conscience, and are more prone to repentance than many who lead more sinful lives. Indeed it is possible that there may be some who can no longer endure the peace and clarity to which they have surrendered themselves, and although one may assume that their insatiable longing for far-off things has grown so great that of necessity it had to swing round to its opposite, to what may have been its original starting-point, yet it is none the less credible that colonists have been observed sobbing with their hands over their faces as though they were yearning for home.

And so, the nearer he approached Mannheim in the dimly breaking dawn, the more painfully was Esch overcome by dread, and he scarcely knew whether the train might not be carrying him straight to the restaurant in Cologne, or whether Mother Hentjen might not be waiting at Mannheim to conceive a child by him. He was disappointed when all that awaited him was the letter on which in any case he had reckoned, and he felt disinclined to read it at all. Especially as he could see from the confounded letter that it had been written under Herr Hentjen's portrait. Perhaps for that reason, but perhaps too out of mere dread, Esch's hand trembled when, in spite of everything, he reached for the letter.

He gave Erna hardly a glance, ignored her reproachful looks, and went at once into the town, for he had a report to hand in at the police headquarters. Strangely enough, however, he landed first in Lohberg's shop, where he passed the time of day, and then he considered whether he should pay a visit to the docks. But he had already lost all desire even for that, and he would have liked best to take a tram out to the prison, although he knew quite well that there was no admittance before the afternoon. Loneliness threatened him, although it was still far off, and at last he stood before the Schiller monument, and would have been quite happy had he found the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty beside it. Perhaps it was merely the difference in the dimensions, but the life-size monument suggested nothing to him, and he found that he was no longer able even to picture Mother Hentjen's restaurant. Thus he frittered away the morning and wrestled with his memories; yes, he must hand in a report to the police, yet he was unable to formulate to himself the contents of that report. With a feeling of immense relief he gave up the plan at last when it dawned upon him that the Mannheim police, who had imprisoned Martin, were unworthy of receiving such a charge, and that he still remained under an obligation to provide the Cologne police with a substitute, as it were, for Nentwig. He felt irritated at himself: that might surely have occurred to him before, but now everything was in order, and he lunched in Lohberg's company with a good appetite.

Then he took a tram to the prison. Again it was a scorching day, again he found himself sitting in the visiting-room—had he ever left it? for everything had remained as it was, and nothing seemed to lie

between that visit and this—again Martin entered with the warder, again Esch felt that agonizing feeling of emptiness in his head, again it was incomprehensible to him why he should be sitting in this official chamber, incomprehensible although it was happening for a definite end and after long premeditation. Fortunately he could feel the cigarettes in his pocket which he would take care this time to hand over to Martin, so that at least the visit might wipe off his former omission. But that was a pretext, yes a pretext, thought Esch, and then: a man's legs must work if his head won't. Everything exasperated him, and as they sat all three at the table again, this time it was Martin's ironically friendly air that exasperated him particularly—it reminded him of something that he did not want to admit to himself.

"So, back from your rest cure, August? You're looking first-rate, too. Have you run up against all your friends?"

Esch was not lying when he replied: "I've run up against nobody."

"Aha! So you weren't at Badenweiler after all?"

Esch could not answer.

"Esch, have you been playing the fool?"

Esch still remained silent, and Martin became serious: "If you've been up to any mischief I'm finished with you."

Esch said: "Things are too queer. What mischief could I be up to?"

Martin replied: "Have you a good conscience? Something isn't as it should be!"

"I have a good conscience."

Martin still regarded him searchingly, and Esch could not but think of the day when Martin had followed him in the street as though to strike him from behind with his crutch. But Martin was now quite friendly again and asked: "And what are you doing here in Mannheim still?"

"Lohberg is going to marry Erna Korn."

"Lohberg … oh, I remember now, the tobacconist fellow. And you're staying on because of that?" Martin's eyes had become suspicious again.

"I'm leaving to-day in any case … to-morrow at latest."

"And what's to happen to you after that?"

Esch wished he were somewhere else. He said: "I'm thinking of going to America."

Martin's aged boy's face smiled: "Well, well, you've wanted to do that for a long time … or have you some particular reason for wanting to leave the country now?"

No, Esch replied; he simply fancied that there were good prospects over there at present.

"Well, Esch, I hope I'll see you again before you leave. Better to be going because you have prospects than because you're running away from something … but if it shouldn't be so, you won't see my face again, Esch!" That sounded almost like a threat, and silence once more sank on the three men sitting at the ink-spotted table in the hot, airless room. Esch got up and said that he must hurry if he was still to catch the train that day, and as Martin once more regarded him questioningly and suspiciously, he pushed the cigarettes into Martin's hand, while the uniformed warder behaved as though he did not see anything, or maybe he had not really seen anything. Then Martin was led away.

On the way back to the town Martin's threat rang in Esch's ears, and perhaps indeed it had already come true, for all at once he could no longer picture Martin to himself, neither his hobbling walk, nor his smile, nor even that the cripple would ever enter the restaurant again. Martin had become strange to him. Esch marched on with long, awkward strides as though he had to increase as quickly as possible the distance between him and the prison, the distance between him and all that lay behind him. No, that man would never run after him again, so as to strike him from behind with his crutch; no man could really run after another, nor could the other send him away, for each was condemned to go his own lonely path, a stranger to all companionship: what mattered was to free oneself from the coil of the past, so that one might not suffer. One had simply to walk fast enough. Martin's threat had had singularly little effect, as if it were a clumsy work-a-day copy of a higher reality with which one had been already familiar for a long time. And if one left Martin behind, if one so to speak sacrificed him, that too was merely a work-a-day version of a higher sacrifice; but it was necessary if the past was to be finally destroyed. True, the streets of Mannheim were still familiar, yet he was making his way into a strange land, into freedom; he walked as on a higher plane, and when next day he arrived at Cologne he would no longer feel abashed before the city and the scenes it presented, he would find them submissive and humble, submissively ready for transformation. Esch made a disdainful gesture with his swinging hands, and even achieved an ironical grimace.

He was so deeply sunk in thought that he passed Korn's door without noticing it; only when he was on the top floor did he realize that he must descend one flight again. And when Fräulein Erna opened the door he started back. He had forgotten her, and there she was looking at him now through the slit of the partly opened door, showing her yellowish teeth and making her demands upon him. It was the demon of the past

itself barring the gate of longing, the grimacing mask of the work-a-day world, more invulnerable and mocking than ever, demanding that one should for ever descend anew into the coils of dead-and-gone things. And here a good conscience could not avail him, here it could not avail him that at any moment he was at liberty to leave this place for Cologne or America,—for a breathspace it seemed to him that Martin had caught him up after all, and as though it were Martin's vengeance that was pushing him down, down to Erna. But Fräulein Erna seemed to know that there was no escape for him, for like Martin she smiled all-knowingly and as in secret intelligence of a still obscure obligation binding him to her world, an obligation that was inescapable and threatening and yet of supreme importance. He gazed searchingly into Fräulein Erna's face; it was the face of a withered Antichrist and gave no answer. "When is Lohberg coming?" Esch asked the question abruptly and as though in the vague hope that the answer would solve his problem; and when Fräulein Erna slyly hinted that she had intentionally refrained from inviting her fiancé, it was undoubtedly a flattering mark of preference, and yet it made him furious. Without regarding her offended looks he ran from the house to invite Lohberg for a visit that evening.

And indeed Esch felt comforted when he found the fool, so deeply comforted that he at once begged for his company and purchased all sorts of eatables and even two bouquets, one of which he stuck in Lohberg's hand. Small wonder that at the sight of them Fräulein Erna should clasp her hands and cry: "Why, here's two real cavaliers!" Esch replied proudly: "A farewell celebration," and while she was setting out the table he sat with his friend Lohberg on the sofa and sang: *Must I then, must I then, leave my native Town*, which won him disapproving and melancholy glances from Fräulein Erna. Yes, perhaps it was really a farewell celebration, a celebration of release from this work-a-day community, and he would have liked to forbid her to lay a place for Ilona. For Ilona too must be released by now and already at the goal. And this wish was so strong that in all seriousness Esch hoped that Ilona would stay away, stay away for ever. And incidentally he felt a little elated at the thought of Korn's disappointment.

Well, Korn really gave signs of being disappointed; though to be sure his disappointment expressed itself in coarse abuse of that Hungarian female, and in rabid impatience for immediate nourishment. Meanwhile he moved his broad bulk with astonishing agility through the room; addressed himself to the liqueur bottles, then to the table from which with his blunt fingers he lifted a few slices of sausage, and when Erna refused to allow this he turned upon Lohberg and with upraised hands shooed him from the sofa, which he claimed for himself by prescriptive right. The noise which the man Korn raised while doing this was extraordinary, his body and voice filled the room more and more, filled it from wall to wall; all that was earthly and fleshly in Korn's ravenously hungry being swelled beyond the confines of the room, threatening mightily to fill the whole world, and with it the unalterable past swelled up, crushing everything else out and stifling all hope; the uplifted and luminous stage darkened, and perhaps indeed it no longer existed. "Well, Lohberg, where's your kingdom of redemption now?" shouted Esch, as though he were seeking to deafen his own terrors, shouted it in fury, because neither Lohberg nor anybody else was capable of giving an answer to the question: why must Ilona descend into contact with the earthly and the dead? Korn sat there on his broad hindquarters and ordered brutally: "Bring in the food!" "No!" shouted Esch, "not till Ilona comes!" For though he was almost afraid of seeing Ilona again, everything was at hazard now, and suddenly Esch was full of impatience for Ilona to appear—as it were to be the touchstone of truth.

Ilona entered. She scarcely noticed the company, simply obeyed the signal of the silently chewing Korn and sat down beside him on the sofa, and in obedience to his equally silent command slung her soft arm languidly round his neck. But for the rest all that she saw was the good things on the table. Erna, who observed all this, said: "If I were you, Ilona, I would keep my hands off Balthasar while I was eating, at least." True, she was merely talking in the air, for Ilona obviously still did not understand a word of German, indeed must not understand it, just as she must not know of the sacrifices that had been made for her. Ignorant of their speech, she could hardly be regarded any longer as a guest at the table of the flesh-bound, but rather as a mere visitor to the prison of the work-a-day world, or as a voluntary captive. And Erna, who to-night seemed to know many things, made no further mention of earthly matters, and it was like an admission of a more subtle understanding when she lifted the bouquet from the table and held it under Ilona's nose: "There, smell that, Ilona," she said, and Ilona replied: "Yes, thank you," and it rang as from a distance which the munching Korn would never reach, rang as from a higher plane ready to receive her if only one did not grow weary in sacrifice. Esch felt light-hearted. Everyone must fulfil his dream, whether it be evil or holy, and then he will partake of freedom. And great pity as it was that the ninny should get Erna, and little as Ilona would ever guess that now the final line had been drawn under an account, it was a settlement and a turning-point, a testimony and the act of a new consciousness when Esch got up, drank to the company, and having briefly and heartily congratulated the betrothed couple, proposed a toast to their health, so that everybody, with the exception of Ilona for whose sake it was really done, looked quite dumbfounded. But as it expressed their secret wishes, their next emotion was gratitude, and

Lohberg with moist eyes shook Esch's hand again and again. Then at Esch's request the happy couple gave each other the betrothal kiss.

Nevertheless what had been done did not yet appear to him final, and when the party was breaking up, and Korn had already retired with Ilona, and Fräulein Erna was preparing to put on her hat so as to keep Esch company in escorting her newly betrothed to his home, then Esch objected; no, he did not regard it as seemly that he, a bachelor, should spend the night in the house of Lohberg's fiancée, he would be very happy to seek a lodging for the night in Herr Lohberg's house or to exchange rooms with him; they should think it over again, for after their betrothal they must have a great many things to talk about; and thereupon he pushed the two of them into Erna's room and betook himself to his own.

In this way ended the first day of his release, and the first night of unaccustomed and unpleasant renunciation broke in.

The sleepless man who with moistened finger-tip has quenched the quiet candle beside his bed, and in the now cooler room awaits the coolness of sleep, with every beat of his heart approaches death without knowing it; for strangely as the cool room has expanded round him, just as stiflingly hot and hurried has time grown within his head, so stifling that beginning and end, birth and death, past and future, crumble to dust in the unique and isolated present, filling it to the brim, indeed almost bursting it.

Esch had considered for a moment whether Lohberg might not after all decide to go home and want his company. But with an ironical grimace he concluded that he might safely go to bed, and still grinning he began to take off his clothes. By the light of the candle he read again Mother Hentjen's letter; the copious items of news about the restaurant were boring; on the other hand there was one passage which pleased him: "And do not forget, dear August, that you are my only love in all the world and will always be, and that I cannot live without you, and would not rest in the cold grave without you, dear August." Yes, that pleased him, and now on Mother Hentjen's account too he was glad that he had sent Lohberg in to Erna. Then he moistened his finger-tip, put out the candle, and stretched himself on the bed.

A sleepless night begins with banal thoughts, somewhat as a juggler displays at first banal and easy feats of skill, before proceeding to the more difficult and thrilling ones. In the darkness Esch could not help grinning still at the thought of Lohberg slipping under the blankets to the coyly tittering Erna, and he was glad that he had no need to be jealous of the ninny. In truth his desire for Erna had now completely gone, but that was all to the good and as it should be. And in reality he only dwelt on the happenings in the other room to demonstrate how indifferent they left him, how indifferent it was to him that Erna was now caressing with her hands the meagre body of the idiot, and suffering such a misbegotten monstrosity beside her, and how totally indifferent what impressions, what phallic images—he employed a different term—she carried in her memory. So easy was it for him to picture all this that it seemed without importance, and besides with that pure Joseph one was not even certain that things would take such a course. Life would be an easy business if things of that kind left him just as indifferent in Mother Hentjen's case,—but the mere impact of the thought was so painful that he started violently, not entirely unlike Mother Hentjen at certain moments. He would gladly have sought refuge with Erna for himself and his thoughts, had not something barred the way, something invisible, of which he only knew that it was the threatening and inescapable presence of that afternoon. So he turned his thoughts to Ilona; all that was needed to establish order there was that the hurtling knives should be erased from her memory. As a preliminary rehearsal, so to speak, for more difficult feats, he tried to think of her, but he was unsuccessful. Yet when at last he managed to picture to himself, with rage and loathing, that at that moment she was languidly and submissively enduring the presence of Korn, that dead lump of flesh, regardless of herself, just as she had stood smiling in the midst of the daggers, waiting for one of them to strike her to the heart—oh, then he suddenly saw the end of his task; for it was self-murder that she was committing in such a curiously complicated and feminine fashion, self-murder that dragged her down into contact with earthly things. That was what she must be rescued from! His task was defined, but it had become a new task! Indeed, if it were not for that threatening something barring the way, he would simply dismiss Ilona from his mind, walk over to Erna's room, seize Lohberg by the collar, and curtly order him to take himself off. After that one would be able to sleep quietly and dreamlessly.

Yet just when he was on the point of picturing to himself how peaceful the world would be then, and already felt within himself the unequivocal desire for a woman, the sleepless Esch was pulled up by an idea which was at once a little comical and a little shocking: he dared not return to Erna, for then it would no longer be possible to tell who was the father of her child. So that was the inexplicable obligation, that was the threat which had made him start back when he saw Erna that afternoon! Yes, it all seemed to fit in; for there was one who had stepped aside to make place for another from whose advent the new dispensation of time was to begin, and it seemed right, too, that a messiah's father should be a pure Joseph. Esch tried

again to summon his ironical grimace, but he was unsuccessful this time; his eyelids were too tightly shut, and no one can laugh in the dark. For night is the time of freedom, and laughter is the revenge of those who are not free. Oh, it was just and right that he should be lying here sleepless and wide awake, in a cold and strange excitement which was no longer the excitement of desire, lying in a semblance of death as in a vault, since the unborn was lying motionless and undreaming likewise. Yet how could one believe that Bertrand had been sacrificed, so that out of the paltry earthly vessel that was called Fräulein Erna new life should spring? Esch cursed to himself, as the sleepless sometimes are accustomed to do, but while he cursed he suddenly realized that after all it did not fit in, inasmuch as the magical hour of death should be the hour of procreation too. One could not be at the selfsame time in Badenweiler and Mannheim; so the conclusion he had drawn was a premature one, and everything was perhaps more complex and more noble.

The darkness of the room was cool. Esch, a man of impetuous temperament, lay motionless in his bed, his heart hammered time down to a thin dust of nothingness, and no reason could any longer be found why one should postpone death into a future which was in any case already the present. To the man who is awake such ideas may seem illogical, but he forgets that he himself exists for the most part in a kind of twilight state, and that only the sleepless man in his overwakefulness thinks with really logical severity. The sleepless man keeps his eyes closed, as though not to see the cold tomblike darkness in which he lies, not to see it, yet fearing that his sleeplessness may topple over into mere ordinary awakeness at the sight of the curtains which hang like woman's skirts before the window, and all the objects which may detach themselves from the darkness if he were to open his eyes. For he wants to be sleepless and not awake, otherwise he could not lie here with Mother Hentjen cut off from the world and safe in his tomb, full of a desire which is lust no longer; yes, he was robbed of desire now, and that too was good. United in death, thought Esch, lying in his semblance of death, yes, united in death, and in truth that would have been comforting, if he could but have refrained from thinking of Erna and Lohberg, who were also in a way united now in death. But in what a way! Well, the sleepless man has no inclination left for cynical witticisms, he wants, as it were, to let the metaphysical content of experience work upon him, and to estimate justly the extraordinary distance that separates his couch from the other rooms in the house, wishes in all seriousness to meditate on the attainable final communion, on the fulfilment of his dream which will lead him to consummation; and as he cannot grasp all these things he becomes morose and aggrieved, becomes enraged and meditates now only on the question: how the dead can possibly give birth to the living. The sleepless man runs his hand over his closely cropped hair, a cool and prickling sensation remains in the palm of his hand; it is like a dangerous experiment which he will not repeat again.

And when by such means he has advanced to more difficult and remarkable feats, his rage waxes, and perhaps it is only the rage of impotent joyless desire. Ilona was committing self-murder in a peculiarly complicated and feminine fashion, suffering night after night the presence of a dead lump of flesh, so that her face was already puffy as though it had been touched by corruption. And every night that that image of obscene lust was imprinted on her the corruption must increase. So that was the reason why he had feared to see Ilona that afternoon! The knowledge of the sleepless man grows into a clairvoyant foreshadowing dream of death, and he recognizes that Mother Hentjen is already dead, that she, the dead woman, can have no child by him, that for this reason alone she has written him a letter instead of coming to Mannheim, written it under the portrait of the man from whose hands she accepted death, just as now Ilona is accepting death from that animal Korn. Mother Hentjen's cheeks too were puffy, time and death were embedded in her face, and the raptures of her nights were dead, dead as the automatic musical instrument which ground out its tune mechanically, one had only to press a lever. And Esch became furious.

The sleepless man does not know that his bed is standing in a certain position in a house in a certain street, and he refuses to be reminded of it. It is notorious that the sleepless are easily moved to anger; the rolling of a solitary tramcar through the night streets is enough to arouse them to fury. And how much stronger then must be their rage over a contradiction so colossal and so terrible that it cannot even be put down to a book-keeping error? In panic haste the sleepless man sets his thoughts flying to discover the meaning of the question which, coming from somewhere or other, from afar off, perhaps from America, now presses on him. He feels that there is a region in his head that is America, a region that is none other than the site of the future in his head, and yet that cannot exist so long as the past keeps breaking in so boundlessly into the future, the wrecked and annihilated overwhelming the new. In this storm that breaks in he himself is carried away, yet not only he, but everyone around him is swept away by the icy hurricane, all of them following the pioneer who has first flung himself into the storm, to be whirled away so that time may once more become time. Now there was no more time left, only an extraordinary amount of space; the sleepless man in his overwakefulness listens and knows that all the others are dead, and even if he shuts his eyelids ever so tightly so as not to see it, he knows that death is always murder.

So the word had appeared again, yet not flitting silently like a butterfly; but with the rattling clangour of

a tramcar in the night streets the word murder had reappeared, and was shouting at him. The dead handed death on. There must be no surviving. As though death were a child, Mother Hentjen had conceived it by the dead tailor fellow, and Korn was imparting it to Ilona. Perhaps Korn too was dead; he was as fat as Mother Hentjen, and of redemption he knew nothing. Or if he were not dead already, he would die—faint comforting hope—would die like the snippet of a tailor, after he had consummated his murder. Murder and counter-murder, shock on shock, the past and the future broke upon each other, broke in the very moment of death which was the present. That must be thought out very vigilantly and very seriously, for only too easily might another book-keeping error slip in. And already how immeasurably difficult it was to distinguish sacrifice and murder from each other! Must all be destroyed ere the world could be redeemed to a state of innocence? Must the deluge break in, was it not enough for one man to sacrifice himself, for one to step aside? Esch still lived, although like all the sleepless he was dead to all appearance, Ilona still lived, although death had already touched her, and only one man was bearing the burden of sacrifice for the new life and the creation of a world in which daggers might no longer be flung. That sacrifice could never be undone now. And as all abstract and universally valid generalizations are to be found in the state of sleepless overwakefulness, Esch arrived at the conclusion: the dead are murderers of women. But he was not dead, and on him lay the obligation to rescue Ilona.

Again arose in him the desire, the impatient desire, to receive death from Mother Hentjen's hand, and the doubt whether it had not already happened. If he submitted himself to that death which came from the dead, he might propitiate the dead, and they might rest content with the one sacrifice. A comforting thought! And as the sleepless man can be more violently overcome with rage than the awake in their twilight state, so his happiness may be far more ecstatic, and he may experience it, one might almost say, with a sort of wild lightness of heart. Yes, that light and liberated feeling of happiness may become so bright that the very darkness behind the closed eyelids catches its radiance. For now it was absolutely certain that Esch, who was alive, a living man by whom women might conceive, if he resigned himself to Mother Hentjen and her body of death, must by this unprecedented measure not only consummate Ilona's redemption, must not only put her for ever beyond the reach of the daggers, must not only retrieve her beauty for her and cancel from her flesh all trace of mortality, cancel it so completely that she would regain a new virginity, but that by doing this he must also of necessity rescue Mother Hentjen from death, vivify again her loins, so that she might bear the one whose task it would be to renew Time.

Then it seemed to him as though his bed were returning with him from a great distance, until at last it rested again in a certain position in a certain alcove, and Esch, reborn in newly awakened longing, knew that he was at his goal, not, it was true, that final goal in which symbol and prototype return to their identity, yet none the less at that temporary goal with which earthly mortals must rest content, the goal that he termed love and that stood as the last attainable point on that coast beyond which lay the unattainable. And, as it were, in antithesis to the symbol and the prototype, women seemed curiously united and yet divided; Mother Hentjen might be sitting in Cologne waiting for him, Ilona might have receded into the unattainable and the invisible, and he knew that he would never see her again—but out there on that horizon where the visible and the invisible, the attainable and the unattainable became one, their ways crossed and their two silhouettes dissolved and merged into each other, and even if they were to separate, they would still remain united in a hope never to be fulfilled: the hope that, embracing Mother Hentjen in perfect love, bearing her life as his own, quickening and redeeming her from death in his arms, embracing in love this woman growing old, he might lift from Ilona the burden of approaching age and of memory, might create as a setting for Ilona's new and virginal beauty the higher plane of his desire; yes, widely separated as the two women were, they yet became one, the reflected image of one, of that invisible entity to which he could never turn back, and which yet was home.

The sleepless Esch was at his goal. In his overwakefulness indeed he had already foreknown the outcome, and he saw that he had merely been spinning a logical chain round it, and had remained wakeful merely because the chain had grown longer and longer; but now he permitted himself to forge the last link, and it was like a complicated book-keeping task which he had solved at last, indeed even more than a book-keeping task; it was the real task of love in all its absoluteness that he had taken upon him in submitting his earthly life to Mother Hentjen. He would gladly have made this conclusion known to Ilona, but in view of her imperfect mastery of the German language he would have to abstain.

Esch opened his eyes, recognized his room, and then went contentedly to sleep.

He had decided for Mother Hentjen. Finally. Esch did not look out through the carriage window. And when he turned his thoughts to this perfect and absolute love of his it was like a daring experiment; acquaintances and customers would be drinking in the brightly lit restaurant; he would enter, and regardless of all those eyewitnesses, Mother Hentjen would run to him and fling herself on his breast. But

when he arrived in Cologne the picture seemed to have altered strangely; for this city was no longer a city that he knew, and his way through the evening streets seemed to stretch for miles and was strange to him. Incredible that he had been away for only six days. Time had stopped, and the house that awaited his entry was quite indefinite, the restaurant quite indefinite in shape and size. Esch stood in the doorway and looked across at Mother Hentjen. She sat enthroned behind the buffet. Above the mirror a light burned under a red shade, silence hung in the air, not a customer was to be seen in the forlorn room. Nothing happened. Why had he come here? Nothing happened; Mother Hentjen remained behind the buffet and said at last in her usual phlegmatic way: "Good-evening." And she glanced nervously round the room. Rage rose up in him, and all at once he could not understand why he had decided for this woman. So he too merely said, "Good-evening," for although he somehow approved of her proud coldness, and knew also that he had no right to repay her in the same coin, yet he felt angry; a man who had decided in his heart for unconditional love was entitled at any rate to be met on an equal footing,—he rapped out: "Thanks for your letter." She looked round the empty restaurant and said furiously: "What if anyone were to hear you?" and Esch, fully roused, replied with particular distinctness: "And what if they did … let this stupid mystery-mongering stop now, for heaven's sake!" said it without point or object, for the restaurant was empty, and he himself did not know why he was there. Mother Hentjen became silent with terror, and mechanically put up her hand to her coiffure. Since she had accompanied him to the train she had keenly regretted being so forward, giving herself away so completely, and after sending that imprudent letter to Mannheim she had actually fallen into a genuine panic; she would have been grateful to Esch now for not mentioning it. But now that with a set, implacable face he openly exploited his advantage, she felt herself again defencelessly caught in a grip of iron. Esch said: "I can go, of course, if you like," and now she would really have issued from behind her counter if the first customers had not at that moment entered. So the two of them remained standing where they were in silence; then Mother Hentjen whispered in a contemptuous tone which was intended to show that she merely wished to carry their quarrel to a finish: "Come back to-night." Esch made no reply, but sat down at his table before a glass of wine. He felt an orphan. His calculations yesterday, which had seemed so clear, had now become incomprehensible to him; how could his deciding for this woman help Ilona? he gazed round the restaurant and still felt it strange; it meant nothing to him now, he had left all those things too far behind. What was he doing in Cologne at all? he should have been in America long ago. But then his glance caught Herr Hentjen's portrait, hanging above the insignia of liberty, and it was as though it suddenly reminded him of something; he asked for paper and ink, and in his most beautiful clerkly script wrote: "I beg to bring to the notice of the Chief Commissioner of Police that Herr Eduard von Bertrand, resident in Badenweiler, Chairman of the Central Rhine Shipping Company Limited in Mannheim, is guilty of illicit practices with persons of the male sex, and I am prepared to appear as a witness and furnish proof of my accusation."

When he was about to append his signature he stopped suddenly, for he had been on the point of adding: "In the name of his bereaved relatives and friends," and although he could not help smiling at this, he was startled. Finally, however, he added his name and address to the communication, and having carefully folded it, deposited it in his pocket-book. Until to-morrow, he told himself, a last respite. The picture postcard from Badenweiler was also sticking in his pocket-book. He considered whether he could present it to Mother Hentjen that night, and felt forlorn. But then he saw before him the alcove, saw her again in her painfully submissive readiness to receive him, and as he passed the buffet he said, and his voice was hoarse: "Well then, to-night." She sat stiffly in her chair and seemed to have heard nothing, so that filled with new rage, a different rage however from the first, he turned back again, and raising his voice recklessly, said: "Be so good as to remove that portrait over there." She still sat immobile, and he slammed the door behind him.

When later he returned and made to open the house door he found it barred from inside. Without considering whether the maid might hear him, he rang the bell, and as nobody answered he went on ringing furiously. That did the trick; he heard footsteps; he almost hoped that it might be the little maid; he would tell her that he had forgotten something in the restaurant, but apart from that the maid would not disdain him, and that would be a lesson for Mother Hentjen. But it was not the maid, it was Frau Hentjen in person; she was still fully dressed and she was crying. Both circumstances increased his rage. They climbed the stairs in silence, and up in her room he fell upon her at once. When she submitted, and her kisses became tender, he asked threateningly: "Is that portrait going to be removed?" She did not know at first of what he was speaking, and when she did she did not quite understand for a moment: "The portrait?… oh, the portrait? why? don't you like it?" In despair before her inability to understand he said: "No, I don't like it … and there's a lot of things besides that I don't like." She replied complaisantly and politely: "If you don't like it I can easily hang it up somewhere else." She was so unutterably stupid that it would probably take a thrashing to make her understand. However, Esch restrained himself: "The portrait must be burned."

“Burned?” “Yes, burned. And if you pretend to be so stupid much longer, I’ll set fire to the whole place.” She recoiled from him in terror, and, pleased with the effect of his threat, he said: “You should be glad; it isn’t as if you had any great love for the place.” She made no reply, and even if her mind was probably blank, and she only saw the flames rising from her roof-top, yet it was as though she were trying to conceal something. He said sternly: “Why don’t you speak?” His harsh tone completely paralysed her. Could this woman not be driven by any means to drop her mask? Esch had risen and now stood threateningly at the entrance to the alcove as though to prevent her from escaping. One would have to call things by their real names, otherwise one would never make anything out of this lump of flesh. But when he asked: “Why did you marry him?” his voice was hoarse and strangled, for with the question so many wild and hopeless emotions surged up in him that in thought he had to fly to Erna for comfort. He had left her, though she did not torment him and it had been completely immaterial to him what phallic images she carried in her memory. And it had been equally immaterial to him whether she had children, or prevented them by artificial devices. He dreaded Mother Hentjen’s answer, did not want to hear it, yet he shouted: “Well?” And Mother Hentjen, her fear that she had given herself away too much reawakened, perhaps also dreading that the nimbus surrounding her, on whose account she imagined Esch loved her, might be in danger of vanishing, gathered herself together: “It’s so long ago … you don’t need to let that worry you.” Esch pushed forward his under jaw and bared his strong teeth: “It shan’t worry me … it shan’t worry me …” he shouted, “it doesn’t worry me in the least.… I don’t give a hang for it.” So this was how she requited his absolute and untiring devotion and his torments. She was stupid and callous; he, who had taken her fate upon him, he, who wanted to take upon him her life although it had been aged and defiled by death, he, August Esch, who was prepared to make the decision and give himself absolutely to her, who longed that all his strangeness might be merged in her, so that all her strangeness and all her thoughts, no matter how painful to him, might become his as it were by way of exchange: it needn’t worry him! Oh, she was stupid and callous, and being so he had to beat her; he went up to the bed and hit out at her and struck her on the fat immobile cheek, as though by doing so he might reach the immobility of her spirit. She did not defend herself, but remained lying rigid, and even if he had flung knives at her, even then she would not have moved. Her cheek was red where he had struck her, and when a tear trickled down over it his anger was softened. He sat down on the bed, and she moved to the side to make room for him. Then he said imperiously: “We must get married.” She simply answered, “Yes,” and Esch was on the point of flying into a new rage, because she did not say that she was glad at last to be rid of the hated name. But the only reply she could think of was to put her arm round him and draw him to her. He was tired, and submitted; perhaps it was all right, perhaps it did not matter, for where the kingdom of salvation was concerned everything was uncertain, every hour uncertain, every figure and every reckoning. Yet he felt embittered again; what did she know about the kingdom of salvation? And did she even want to know about it? probably as little as Korn! it would certainly take some time to hammer it into her head. But meanwhile one must simply allow for that, must wait until she could understand it, must let her carry on her life as she was doing. In the land of justice, in America, it would be different; there the past would fall away like tinder. And when she asked him constrainedly whether he had stopped at Ober-Wesel, he was not annoyed, but shook his head seriously and growled: “Of course not.” And so they celebrated their marriage night, and agreed to sell the business, and Mother Hentjen was grateful to him for not setting fire to anything. In a month’s time they might be on the high seas. To-morrow he would see Teltscher and set the American project going again.

He remained longer than usual. Nor did they descend the stairs on tiptoe this time. And when she let him out there were already people in the streets. That filled him with pride.

Next morning he betook himself to the Alhambra. Of course nobody was there. He rummaged among the correspondence on Gernerth’s desk, found an unopened envelope which bore his own handwriting, and was so taken aback for a moment that he did not recognize it: it was Erna’s letter that he had himself written in Mannheim. Well, she would raise another fine outcry if she had received no reply all this time. And really not without justification. A careless lot, those theatre people.

At last Teltscher came wandering in. Esch was almost glad to see him again. Teltscher was in a gracious mood: “Well, high time for you to be back,—everybody disappears on private business and Teltscher is left to do all the measly work.” Where was Gernerth? “Oh, in Munich with his precious family—grave illness in the family, they’ve got colds in the head or something.” He would soon be back, Esch supposed. “He’ll have to come back soon, the Herr Manager; last night there were scarcely fifty people in the theatre. We’ll have to talk it over with Oppenheimer.” “Right,” said Esch, “let’s go and see Oppenheimer.”

They agreed with Oppenheimer that they would have to announce the end of the show. “Have I warned you, or haven’t I?” said Oppenheimer. “Wrestling is all right, but nothing but wrestling! who would come to

see that?" The decision suited Esch very well; all that he need do was to have his share paid to him when Gernerth returned, and the sooner the end came, the sooner they would get to America.

This time he asked Teltscher of his own accord to lunch with him, for now it was a matter of setting about the American project. Hardly were they on the pavement before Esch drew the list from his pocket and ticked off the girls whom he had earmarked for the journey. "Yes, I've got a few too," said Teltscher, "but first Gernerth must pay me back my money." Esch was surprised, for Teltscher should surely have been satisfied with Lohberg's and Erna's contributions. Teltscher said in exasperation: "And whose money have we been financing the wrestling matches with, do you think? Gernerth's money is tied up, don't you know that? He gave me the stage properties in pledge, but what can I do with them in America?" All this was somewhat surprising, but all the same when the business was liquidated Gernerth's money would be released, and then Teltscher could go to America. "Ilona must come too," decided Teltscher. That's where you make your mistake, my dear fellow, thought Esch, Ilona won't be mixed up with these things again; for though she might still be attached to Korn, that would not last much longer; soon she would be living in a distant, inaccessible castle, in whose grounds the deer grazed. He said that he must visit the police headquarters, and they made the necessary detour. In a stationer's shop Esch bought several newspapers and an envelope; he stuck the papers in his pocket, and with many flourishes addressed the envelope on the spot. Then he took out of his pocket-book the carefully folded sheet of paper, stuck it into the envelope and went over to the police buildings. As soon as he emerged again he continued his conversation; there was no need for Ilona to go with them. "Don't talk stuff," replied Teltscher, "in the first place, think of the splendid engagements we could get over there, and secondly, if the American idea should come to nothing, we must set to work here. She's idled long enough; besides, I've written to her already." "Nonsense," replied Esch rudely, "if you're dealing in young girls you can't take a woman with you." Teltscher laughed: "Well, if you think I shouldn't, you'll have to indemnify me for the damage to my prospects. You're a big capitalist now … and one generally brings back money from a business excursion, doesn't one?" Esch was alarmed; it seemed to him that Teltscher had glanced knowingly across at the police buildings—what could that mean? What did the Jewish conjurer know? he himself knew nothing of this business excursion; he turned on Teltscher: "Go to the devil! I haven't brought back any money." "No harm intended, Herr Esch, don't take it in that way, I didn't mean anything."

They turned into Mother Hentjen's restaurant, and to Esch it seemed again as though Teltscher possessed some secret knowledge, and might suddenly turn on him and say, "Murderer." He was afraid to look round the room. At last he raised his eyes and beheld a white patch, edged with cobwebs, where Hentjen's portrait had hung. He glanced across at Teltscher, but Teltscher said nothing, for he obviously had not noticed anything, had not noticed anything at all! Esch felt almost exultant; partly out of high spirits, partly to distract Teltscher's attention from the disappearance of the portrait, he went up to the orchestrion and set it noisily going; in response to the din Mother Hentjen appeared, and Esch felt a strong temptation to greet her with affectionate and tempestuous ardour; he would have liked to introduce her as Frau Esch, and if he refrained from this tender jest, it was not only because he felt grateful to her and prepared to respect her shyness, but also because Herr Teltscher-Teltini was quite unworthy of such a mark of intimacy. On the other hand Esch did not feel in the least bound to push discretion too far, and when after lunch Teltscher prepared to leave he did not accompany him as usual, to return afterwards by circuitous ways, no, he said quite openly that he would stay for a little and read his papers. He pulled the newspapers out of his pocket, put them back again, and remained sitting with his hands resting peacefully on his knees. He did not want to read. He contemplated the white patch on the wall. And when everything was quiet he went up the stairs. He felt grateful to Mother Hentjen and they had a pleasant afternoon. They spoke again of selling the business, and Esch thought that perhaps Oppenheimer might find a purchaser. And they tenderly discussed their marriage. There was a spot on the ceiling of the alcove that looked like a dark butterfly, but it was only dirt.

In the evening he dutifully set out on his search for girls. On his way it struck him that he should first look in to see what that lad Harry was doing. His search was in vain and he was about to leave the wretched place when Alfons entered. Fat Alfons presented a comical picture; his greasy dishevelled hair was sticking to his skull, his silk shirt was open, showing his white hairless breast, and one was reminded somehow of rumpled pillows. Esch could not help laughing. Alfons sat down beside a table near the door and groaned. Esch went up to him still laughing, yet in doing so it was as though he were trying to stifle something: "Hullo, Alfons, what's the matter?" The fat musician gazed at him with dull and hostile eyes. "Have a drink, and tell me what's wrong." Alfons drank a glass of brandy and remained silent. Finally he said: "Good God … it's past belief … he's to blame for it himself, and he asks what's wrong!" "Don't talk nonsense. What is wrong?" "Good God! Why, he's dead!" Alfons put his hands under his chin and gazed in front of him; Esch sat down at the table. "Well, who is dead?" Alfons stammered: "He loved him too much."

Now it sounded funny again. “Who loved whom?” Alfons’s voice suddenly broke: “Don’t talk like that; Harry’s dead.…” So, Harry was dead. Esch could not really take it in and gazed somewhat blankly at the fat musician, down whose cheeks tears were running: “You put him quite beyond himself with your silly talk last time … he loved him too much … when he read it in the papers he locked himself in … this afternoon … and now they’ve found him … veronal.” So, Harry was dead; in some way that fitted in, it was bound to come. Only Esch could not see how it fitted in. He said, “Poor chap,” and suddenly he saw it and was filled with relief and joy because that forenoon he had handed in his letter at the police headquarters; here murder and counter-murder, debit and credit cancelled each other, here was for once an account that balanced itself perfectly. Funny to think that in spite of this he himself seemed to be in some way to blame. He said again: “Poor chap … why did he do it?” Alfons glared at him in blank astonishment: “But he saw it in the newspapers.…” “Saw what?” “There,” Alfons pointed to the bunch of newspapers peeping from Esch’s coat-pocket. Esch shrugged his shoulders—he had forgotten the newspapers. He pulled them out; there it was, in large letters, and with many circumlocutions, on the black-bordered last page, for all the firms with which he was connected, and his staff officials, and his workers, had insisted on the melancholy privilege of divulging the sad news that Herr Eduard von Bertrand, Chairman of the Board of Directors, a knight of various distinguished orders, etc., after a short serious illness had passed away. On the front page, however, along with a highly eulogistic obituary notice, was the information that, it was supposed in a sudden fit of mental aberration, the deceased had put an end to his life with a revolver shot. Esch read all this, but it did not very much interest him. It merely proved to him how right it was that the portrait had been removed that day. Funny that a man like this musician, who was not implicated at all, could make such a song about it. With a faint ironical grimace he clapped the fat musician benevolently and comfortingly on the flabby shoulder, paid for the brandy, and went back to Frau Hentjen. Stepping out complacently with long strides, he thought of Martin and reflected that now the cripple would no longer pursue him and menace him with his hard crutches. And that too was good.

Alone, Alfons put his head between his hands and stared in front of him. Esch seemed to him a bad man, like all men who sought women in order to possess them. He had learned by experience that all men of that type sowed evil. They seemed to him like savages running amok, raging through the world so that at their approach all one could do was to step aside. He scorned those men who rushed about in such a stupid fury, greedy not for life, which they obviously did not see, but for something which lay outside it, and to gain which they destroyed it in the name of this love of theirs. The musician was too dejected to think this out clearly; but he knew that although those men spoke with great ardour of their love, all that they meant by it was possession, or what is usually understood by that term. Of course he himself did not count, for at best he was a thoughtless chap, a poor devil of an orchestra player; but he knew that one did not attain the absolute by a long way when one decided for some woman. And he forgave the malignant rage of men, for he saw quite well that it sprang from fear and disappointment, saw that these passionate and evil men hid themselves behind a remnant of eternity to shield themselves from the fear that was always at their backs, telling them they must die. A stupid and thoughtless orchestra player he might be, but he could play sonatas from memory, and, versed in all kinds of knowledge, in spite of his sadness he could smile at the fact that human beings in their thirst for the absolute yearn for eternal love, imagining that then their lives can never come to an end, but will endure for ever. They might despise him because he had to play potpourris and polkas; nevertheless he knew that these hunted creatures, seeking the imperishable and the absolute in earthly things, would always find no more than a symbol and a substitute for the thing which they sought, and whose name they did not know: for they could watch others dying without regret or sorrow, so completely were they mastered by the thought of their own death; they furiously strove for the possession of some woman that they might in turn be possessed by her, for in her they hoped to find something steadfast and unchangeable which would own and guard them, and they hated the woman whom in their blindness they had chosen, hated her because she was only a symbol which they longed to destroy in their anger when they found themselves once more delivered over to fear and death. The musician felt pity for women; for although they wished for nothing better, yet they were not subject to that destructive and stupid passion for possession, they were less goaded by fear, and were thrilled more deeply when music was played to them, and stood in a more intimate and trustful relation to death: and in that women were like musicians, and even if one were oneself only a fat homosexual orchestra player, yet one could feel akin to them, could acknowledge that they had a faint divination that death was a sad and beautiful thing; for when they wept it was not because they had lost a possession, but simply because something that they had touched and seen had been good and gentle. Oh, those whose hearts thirsted for possession did not know the rapturous chaos of life, and the others knew little more of it; yet music divined it, music the melodious symbol of all that could be thought, music that annulled time so that it might be

preserved in rhythm, that annulled death so that it might rise anew in sound. One who divined this, like the women and the musicians, might accept the disgrace of being thoughtless and stupid, and the musician Alfons ran his fingers over the rolls of fat on his body as though they were a good soft covering through which he could feel the presence of something precious and worthy of love; people could despise him and jeer at his effeminacy, well, he was only a poor devil, but nevertheless he was capable of surrendering himself more blissfully and passively and submissively to all the diverse manifestations of the eternal than those who jeered at him and yet made out of a tiny scrap of mortality the symbol and goal of their wretched striving. It was he who should despise the others. He was sorry even for Esch, and he could not help thinking of the heroic battle-music to whose strains the gladiators entered the arena, that the warrior, his courage stimulated, might forget that death stood at his back. He considered whether he should watch by Harry's bed, but he shuddered at the thought of the waxen face, and he decided instead to get drunk and watch the waiters and the customers, who moved about and yet bore on their faces the stamp of death.—

At the same hour that night Ilona rose from her bed and by the light of the tiny red lamp under the image of the Virgin regarded the sleeping form of Balthasar Korn. He was snoring, and when the sound ceased it was like the cessation of the music in the theatre before her act; and presently in the whistling of his breath the thin whizzing of the hurtling knives could be heard. Really she was not thinking of this at all, although she had received Teltscher's letter calling her back. She regarded Korn and tried to picture how he would have looked as a little boy and without his black moustache. She did not know clearly why she was doing this, but it seemed to her that then the Mother of God gazing from the wall would be readier to forgive her sin. For sin it was to have employed him for her unholy lust under the holy eyes of the Virgin, and if she had not been infected with disease as a young girl she too might have had children. That she had to forsake Korn left her indifferent, for she knew that someone else would succeed him; and that she had to return to Teltscher also left her indifferent; it did not give her a moment's thought that he was waiting for her in Cologne and counting on her; she simply knew that he needed her so that he might have someone at whom to throw his daggers. Also the fact that she was to go to America left her indifferent. She had travelled about too much already, and America was a place like any other place. She was without hope and without fear. She had learned to leave men, but for to-night she felt that she still belonged to Korn. She bore a scar on her neck, and she felt that the man to whom she had been unfaithful that time had been justified in trying to kill her. If Korn had been unfaithful to her, however, she would not have killed him, but merely thrown vitriol at him. Yes, in matters of jealousy such an apportionment of punishment seemed to her fitting, for if one possessed another one would want to destroy, but if one merely employed another one could content oneself with making the object unfit for use. That held good for everybody, even for a queen. For all human beings were the same, and no one could do any good to another. When she stood on the stage it was light, and when she lay with a man it was dark. One lived to eat, and ate to live. Once a man had killed himself because of her; it had not touched her very deeply, but she liked to remember it. Everything else sank into shadow, and in the shadow human forms moved like darker shadows which melted into one another and struggled to detach themselves again. Everybody did nothing but evil, it was as though they could not help punishing themselves for seeking enjoyment in one another. She was a little proud that she too had brought fatality, and when that man killed himself it had been like an act of expiation and a compensation from God for her barrenness. Many things were incomprehensible, indeed all. One could not brood over the meaning of happenings; but when children came into the world the shadows seemed to thicken and become corporeal, and then it was as though a sweet music filled the world of shadows from end to end. That too perhaps was why Mary bore the Christ-Child up there above the red lamp. Erna would marry and have children: why had Lohberg not taken her, instead of that skinny sallow little thing? She contemplated Korn and found in his face nothing of what she sought; his hairy hands lay on the sheet and had never been tender and young. She shuddered at the sight of his red-lit fleshy face with the black moustache, and went softly on her bare feet across to Erna's room, slipped gently and insinuatingly in beside her, tenderly pressed herself against that angular body, and in this posture fell asleep.

Esch now comported himself already almost as a prospective husband, or, more correctly, a protector, for though they had not yet let fall any hint of their engagement, Esch knew what was due to a weak woman, and she allowed him to guard her interests. He was empowered to deal not only with the man who brought the mineral water and ice, but also with Oppenheimer, who at his suggestion had been entrusted with the disposal of the business. For in addition to his theatrical work the enterprising Oppenheimer undertook, whenever he got the chance, the disposal of real estate, and acted for various kinds of agencies, and he was of course delighted to devote all his attention to this matter. For the moment, it was true, his mind was distracted by other cares. He came to look over the house, but half way up the stairs he remained standing

and said: “Quite inexplicable, this business of Gernerth; I hope to God nothing has happened to him … well, why should I bother, it isn’t my business.” And although he repeated this again and again as though to quiet his mind, he returned just as often to the fact that Gernerth had now been away for eight days, now, at the very moment when they were about to wind up the wrestling business and would need the money for the salaries and the rent, which was in arrears. That Gernerth, such a scrupulous fellow, should have allowed the rent to get into arrears, he could never have believed it. And when they had done so splendidly until recently, yes, quite splendidly. At present, of course, they weren’t even covering their expenses. Well, high time that it was wound up. “And that ass Teltscher has let him go away without even leaving the desk key, and can’t do anything. And Gernerth has all his money in the Darmstadt Bank! … too lofty and artistic, of course, Herr Teltscher, to bother his head about such matters.”

Esch had listened indifferently until now, especially as it seemed quite understandable to him that Teltscher should be more interested in the American project than in the wrestling, which was coming to an end. But now he pricked up his ears: money in the Darmstadt Bank? He flew at Oppenheimer: “My friends’ investments are in that money in the Darmstadt Bank; it must be handed over!” Oppenheimer wagged his head: “Really it isn’t any concern of mine,” he said, “but to make sure I’ll send a telegram to Gernerth in Munich. He must come and put things in order. You’re right, there’s no use in beating about the bush.” Esch approved of the idea, and the telegram was sent off; they got no reply. Anxious now, they sent two days later a telegram to Frau Gernerth, reply prepaid, and learned that Gernerth had not returned to Munich at all. That was suspicious. And at the end of the week they must settle up all the accounts! There was nothing for it but to notify the police; the police discovered that three weeks before all the money that remained in the Darmstadt Bank had been lifted by Gernerth, and now no more doubt remained; Gernerth had absconded with the money! Teltscher, who had stuck up for Gernerth to the last moment, and now called himself the stupidest Jew in the world for being diddled again by a rotter, Teltscher was suspected of having played into Gernerth’s hands. In view of the theatre properties which Gernerth had left him in pledge, it took him all his time to prove his innocence; but that he succeeded in doing so really helped him very little—he had hardly enough money left to tide him over the next few days. Helpless as a child, he blamed himself and the world at large, kept on repeating tiresomely that Ilona would have to come, and several times a day pestered Oppenheimer with requests for an immediate engagement. Oppenheimer took the blow more philosophically, for it was not his money that had been lost; he comforted Teltscher: things weren’t so bad after all, as owner of the theatre properties a man with the name of Teltscher-Teltini would make a splendid theatre manager; if he could only get hold of some working capital everything would be all right again, and he would have many dealings yet with old Oppenheimer. Teltscher saw the idea at once, and recovered his old vigour so quickly and so completely that in a jiffy he had hatched out a new plan and straightway run with it to Esch.

But by the last turn of events Esch had been more than annoyed. Although he had always divined, yes even known, that the American journey would never come to anything, and although simply perhaps because of this he had been so lax and casual in securing girls for it, and although finally he actually felt a certain satisfaction at the fact that his inner convictions had been justified: nevertheless his whole life had been directed towards this American plan, and he felt now shaken to the depths, for it seemed to him that the foundations of his connection with Mother Hentjen had been undermined. Where was he to go with her? and how did he stand in relation to this woman now? He had wanted her to see him as the lord and master of a whole troupe of artists, and now the whole lot had left him stranded in this measly fashion! He felt ashamed to face Mother Hentjen.

It was while he was in this mood that Teltscher burst in upon him with his plan: “Look here, Esch, you’re a capitalist now, you could come in as my partner.” Esch stared at him as though he had gone out of his wits: “A partner? Have you gone off your head? You know as well as I do that it’s all up with the American plan.” “One can earn a living in Europe,” said Teltscher, “and if you want to invest your money profitably …” “Money? What money?” shouted Esch. Well, there wasn’t any need to shout: he had heard casually that someone had come in for a legacy, said Teltscher, and it made Esch quite furious: “You’ve surely gone quite off your head,” he shouted, “what is all this drivel? Isn’t it enough that I’ve been swindled once by you …?” “If that scoundrel Gernerth clears out, you can’t hold me responsible for it,” said Teltscher in an offended voice, “I’ve lost more than you, and because I’m down and out you needn’t insult me when I bring you an honourable proposal.” Esch growled: “It’s not a matter of my losses, but the losses of my friends.…” “I offer you the chance of winning the money back again.” That was a hope, of course, and Esch asked what Teltscher’s proposals were. Why, with the theatre properties they could start something, Oppenheimer thought that too, and Esch had seen for himself that money could be made once one set about it with any degree of skill. “And if I refuse?” Then of course there was nothing for it but to store the theatre properties and secure an engagement somewhere with Ilona. Esch became reflective; so Teltscher would

have to get an engagement with Ilona? … throw knives? … hm … he would think it over.

Next day he made inquiries of Oppenheimer, for with Teltscher the greatest caution was imperative. Oppenheimer confirmed Teltscher's statements. "I see … then he'll have to get an engagement again with Ilona…." "He can count on me, I'll soon get an engagement for him," said Oppenheimer, "what else is there left for him to do?" Esch nodded: "And if he were to rent a theatre himself, he would need money …?" "I don't suppose you have the few thousands needed?" said Oppenheimer. No, he hadn't. Oppenheimer wagged his head to and fro: it couldn't be done without money; perhaps they could interest somebody else in the matter … how about Frau Hentjen, for example, who wanted to sell her business and would have a lot of ready money at her disposal? He had no influence there, said Esch, but he would put the proposal to Frau Hentjen.

He did not like doing it, it was a new task, but there was no getting round it. Esch felt the victim of a most insidious attack. Quite possible that in spite of everything Oppenheimer and Teltscher were in league; the two Jews! Why should nothing remain for a bounder like that but to throw knives? as though there weren't honest and decent work to be had! And what was that he had drivelled about a death and a legacy? They had driven him into a cul-de-sac, it was as though they knew that nothing once done could be undone; that Ilona must be shielded from the knives and the world saved from injustice, that Bertrand's sacrifice must not have been in vain, any more than the removal of Herr Hentjen's portrait! No, nothing could be undone, nothing must be undone, for justice and freedom were involved, freedom, whose safety one dared no longer leave to the demagogues and the Socialists and the venal hirelings who wrote for the Press. That was his task. And that he had to retrieve Lohberg's and Erna's money seemed to him a part and a symbol of this higher task. And besides, if Teltscher could not rent a theatre, then the money would be lost for ever! There was no escape. Esch set the accounts against each other, made his calculations, and the sum gave the clear answer: he must induce Mother Hentjen to yoke herself like him to the task.

When he saw this clearly his uncertainty and anger faded. He mounted his bicycle, rode home, and sent Lohberg a detailed account of Herr Gernerth's incredible and revolting crime, adding that he had at once taken reliable measures to protect the investors, and begging the esteemed Fräulein Erna not to be disturbed.

So it was all up with America. Now he would have to stay in Cologne. The door of the cage had slammed to. He was imprisoned. The torch of liberty was quenched. Strangely enough he could not feel angry with Gernerth. For the real blame lay with a greater than Gernerth, with one who in spite of all temptation and inducement had politely declined to fly to America. Yes, that seemed to be the law, though it was not justice; whoever sacrificed himself must give up his liberty first of all. Nevertheless his position remained an incredible one. Esch repeated: "Imprisoned," as though he had to convince himself of it. And almost with a quiet mind, disturbed only by the merest twinge of conscience, he told Mother Hentjen that they would have to postpone the American journey for the present, for Gernerth had sailed in advance to make arrangements for them over there.

Really one could tell Mother Hentjen whatever one liked; she had never shown the slightest interest either in the wrestling or in Herr Gernerth, and besides in what happened around her she saw only what it suited her to see. So now all that she saw was that the dreaded journey to a strange and adventurous land was abandoned, and the knowledge was like a warm and comforting bath into which her soul had been unexpectedly dipped, and which she had to enjoy in silence for a little before she said: "To-morrow I'll have in the painters, or winter will be on us and then the walls won't dry properly." Esch was taken aback: "The painters? But you want to sell the place!" Mother Hentjen put her hands on her hips: "Oh well, it will be a good time yet before we go,—I'll have the place painted, it must be kept in order." Esch shrugged his shoulders and gave in: "Perhaps it will pay us, might get it back in the price." "That's so," said Mother Hentjen. Nevertheless she could not shake off a faint residue of uncertainty—who knew? perhaps the American ghost had not been really laid—and she found it altogether right and proper that she should pay something for her stability and security. So Esch and Oppenheimer were very pleasantly surprised when they found little trouble in persuading Frau Hentjen that the theatrical business must be financed during Gernerth's absence; and she agreed just as readily to a mortgage on the house, which Oppenheimer with great foresight had brought with him. The transaction was concluded, and Oppenheimer pocketed a commission of one per cent.

In this way did Mother Hentjen become a partner in Teltscher's new theatrical venture; thanks to Oppenheimer's agency a theatre was rented in the bustling town of Duisburg, and Mother Hentjen could justly hope that she would share in really ample profits. Esch had insisted on three conditions: first that he should retain the right to inspect the books, secondly that before the liquidation of the affair the remainder of Lohberg's and Erna's capital investment should be repaid (that was only just and reasonable, even if

Mother Hentjen had no need to know anything about it), and thirdly he forced Herr Teltscher and Herr Oppenheimer by a clause in the contract to strike out the favourite knife-throwing act from any conjuring performance that might take place. “Off his jump!” said the two gentlemen; but Esch held to his point.

Thus far things had gone smoothly and in irreproachable order. The sacrifice which Mother Hentjen had made had now bound him to her for ever and rendered his decision irrevocable. True, the hated business was not yet sold, but the mortgage was in a way a first step towards the annihilation of the past. And in Mother Hentjen’s bearing too there were things that might be read as signs of the beginning of a new life. She contested his marriage plans as little as she had contested the mortgage, and she was filled with a gentleness such as no one had seen in her hitherto. The autumn had come, premature and cold, and she wore again the grey dimity blouse, and was often without her corsets. Even her stiff coiffure seemed to have loosened; no doubt about it, she devoted no longer the old, cunning solicitude to her outward appearance, and in that too one could see the difference between the present and the past. Esch stamped through the house. If one were imprisoned and without anything to do, at least one should get something out of it. All the same, this couldn’t be called a new life. At breakfast he sat in the restaurant, and at supper-time he was still sitting there. Mother Hentjen made sundry remarks about wastrels and ne’er-do-wells who liked to give themselves airs, but she fed him willingly. Esch put up with everything. He studied his newspaper, and sometimes examined the picture postcards sticking in the mirror frame, glad that among them there was none with his own handwriting. And he supervised the house-painters and whitewashers in case they should damage anything. It was easy for Mother Hentjen to talk. A fine lot she cared for the new life! With women it was a simple business anyway—Esch had to laugh—they could carry the new life about with them anywhere, under their hearts, that was to say. That of course was why they had no desire to go out into the new world, they had everything already within their four walls and thought that they had only to remain sitting in their cage to be innocent! There they scrubbed and polished and fancied that by satisfying their petty mechanical instinct for order they had done the trick! The new life in a cage? as if it was as simple as all that!

No, with petty devices, with petty modifications, the new life, the state of innocence, was not to be brought about in captivity. The unchangeable, the already done, the earthly work-a-day world, was not so easy to circumvent. The house stood there unchanged, and no mark of that measly mortgage was to be seen on it. The streets, the towers, round which the autumn wind whistled, were unchanged, and of the breath of the future there was no longer any trace. And really to rouse from sleep Mother Hentjen’s memories and Mother Hentjen’s past life, one would need to set fire to the four corners of Cologne and raze it to the ground, until not one stone remained on another. For what good did it do him that Mother Hentjen now wore her hair a little less stiffly brushed back? she still strutted unchanged through the streets, and people lifted their hats to her, and everybody knew what name she bore. God knows, he had not thought it would be like this when, for the sake of the sacrifice, he had taken upon him her advancing years and her fading charms. Even if her hair were to grow grey overnight, if all at once she were to become a quite old woman who no longer could remember anything about her life, irrecognizable to all who had known her, a stranger attached by no bond to her accustomed surroundings,—even that might be the new life! And Esch could not keep back the thought that every fresh child aged the mother, and that childless women did not grow old: they were changeless and dead, with no hold on time. But when women were awaiting a new life, then they were filled with the hope that time would begin again for them, and it was as though the thing that aged them re-won for them a new virginity; it was to them a hope that all living beings might attain the state of innocence, a prophetic dream of death and yet new life, the coming of the kingdom of salvation in this ageworn world. Sweet, never-to-be-fulfilled hope.

Frankly, such thoughts would hardly have been to Mother Hentjen’s taste. Anarchistic ideas, she would have called them. Perhaps even with justice. For one had revolutionary thoughts and made revolutionary speeches when one found oneself in prison. And did not even know that one was doing it. Esch clattered up and down the stairs, cursed the house, cursed the steps, cursed the workers. A fine appearance this new life of his had! The clean patch on the wall where the portrait had hung was now painted over, so that one might almost imagine that the portrait had been removed merely that the patch might be effaced. For no other reason. Esch stared up at the wall. No, this was no new life at all that he had begun; on the contrary, to all appearances Time had been put back to where it was before. This woman seemed literally resolved to cancel and undo everything. And one day after cleaning and dusting she came down into the restaurant, sweating and blown and yet pleased with herself: “Ouf, you wouldn’t believe how much the place was needing a doing up.” Esch asked absently: “When was it done up last?” but suddenly it dawned on him that it must have been on the occasion of her marriage; he brought down his fist on the table so that the plates rattled, and shouted: “Of course the cage only needs to be painted each time a new bird is put in it!” A little more, and he would have thrashed her out there in the restaurant. He was tired of being forced to turn his

head the wrong way, always having to look back into the past. And on the top of that she expected him to pay court to her; for she seemed in no hurry with the marriage. On every side, unconquerable, the accustomed rose up again. And the substantial strand of settled habit was palpable enough in all her new warmth and softness, and everything went to show that not only did she contemplate taking up her old life again and continuing it for all eternity, but it looked also as though she wished to reduce love and lover alike to the rank of an ornamental accessory, to a sort of painted wall decoration in the house of her life. And even that semi-official intimacy which she had granted him as in a manner of speaking a security for their bond, she was trying now to curtail again. When he went off to Duisburg to supervise Teltscher's accounts, not a word of appreciation did she vouchsafe him, and when he suggested that she might perhaps go there with him some time, she talked of impudence and retorted that he should stay there; that was the sort of company that suited him.

And Mother Hentjen was right! Yes, even in that! She was right to show him that in her house he was no more than a merely tolerated homeless orphan, one with whom nobody could have any real companionship. And yet she was not right! And that perhaps was the worst of all. For behind her apparently justified coldness, behind her apparently righteous condemnation, the old senseless fear peeped out again and again that he too—he, August Esch!—might simply have had his eyes on her money in wanting to marry her. That became quite clear when the deeds of mortgage arrived; Mother Hentjen pried about in the papers for a while with an offended expression and at last said reproachfully: "Why, I never thought the stamp duty would be so high!… I could easily have paid it out of my savings-bank account if I had known," by which it became clear as the day that she possessed secret reserves and preferred to conceal them, yes, preferred to accept a mortgage on her house rather than let him know anything about them. Not to speak of putting them under his skilled supervision. Yes, that was what this woman was like. She had learned nothing, knew nothing about the kingdom of salvation, and desired to know nothing about it. And the new life was a dead letter to her. She was striving again to return to that commercial and conventional kind of love to which he had submitted and yet could no longer endure: it was a vicious circle from which there was no escape. What had been was inescapable and unalterable. Unassailable. And even if one were to annihilate the whole city—the dead would still remain the mightier force.

And now Lohberg next made his appearance. He showed that his suspicions were aroused because only the capital was to be repaid without his and Erna's promised share of the profits. That was surely the last straw. But when the fool hinted a little awkwardly and yet with a certain pride that every penny would be a godsend to him, for Erna was now well on the way, and they must seriously think of getting married, it sounded to Esch like a voice from the beyond, and he knew that his sacrifice was not yet complete. The faint and shabby hope that this child, for which he disclaimed all responsibility, might after all be Lohberg's, was swallowed up in the unearthly knowledge that for the perfect love he had chosen an atonement must be made, atonement for a blasphemy in which the menacing reverberation of murder could be heard, so that his love was cursed with barrenness, while the child conceived in sin and without love would irrevocably come to birth. And although he was full of anger at Mother Hentjen, who knew nothing of this and thought only of getting her house painted instead of sharing his terrors, he longed for such an atonement, and the wish that Mother Hentjen might raise her arm to kill him again became strong. Yet in spite of this he had to congratulate Lohberg, and shaking him by the hand he said: "Your winnings will be paid if I can do it … as a christening gift." What else remained to be done? He passed his hand over his stiff closely cropped hair, and a cool prickling sensation remained in the palm of his hand. From Lohberg he learned also that Ilona was going to depart for Duisburg shortly. And he decided that beginning from the first of next month he must have Teltscher's books posted monthly to him in Cologne for supervision.

Yes, what else remained to be done? For it was all as it should be. Erna would have a child born in wedlock, and he would marry Mother Hentjen, and the restaurant would be freshly painted and laid with brown linoleum. And nobody guessed all that lay concealed behind the fine smooth surface, nobody knew by whom the child had been begotten who would now bear Lohberg's name, or that the perfect love in which he had sought salvation was nothing but a cheat and a lie, a blatant swindle to gloss over the fact that he was merely one among an indeterminate number of the snippety tailor's successors, he who had dreamt of flight and the joys of freedom, and yet now was condemned to rattle the bars of his cage. It was growing darker and darker, and the mists beyond the ocean would never thin away.

He began to avoid the house; it had become cramped and unfamiliar. He wandered along the banks of the Rhine, studied the rows of sheds, and gazed after the ships as they slowly floated down the river. He came to the Rhine Bridge, strolled on past the police headquarters to the Opera House, and reached the people's park. To stand on a seat and sing, with girls beating tambourines in front of one, yes, perhaps there was something in that, after all; to sing of the captive soul which could be set free through the power of redeeming love. Probably they were right, these Salvation Army idiots, in saying that first of all one must

find one's way to this true and perfect love. Even the torch of liberty could not light one to redemption, for Bertrand, in spite of all his American and Italian journeys, had not been saved. It was simply no use trying to cheat oneself, one remained orphaned, one remained standing shivering in the snow, waiting for the redeeming grace of love gently to descend. Then, yes, then at last the miracle might descend, the miracle of perfect fulfilment. The home-return of the orphan child. The miracle of an ingemination of the world and of individual fate—and the child for whose sake Bertrand had stepped aside would not be a child of Erna's, but of another who in spite of everything would yet bring forth new life! Soon the snow would be coming, soft feathery snow. And the captive soul would be redeemed, hallelujah, would stand up on the bench, higher than he had stood who was accustomed to stand so high. And in his spirit Esch for the first time named that other who was to bear him the child by her Christian name: Gertrud.

Every time he came home he looked in her face. Her face was friendly, and her mouth conscientiously enumerated all the things that she had cooked that morning. And if August Esch had not any great hunger he turned away. It horrified him to think, and the knowledge was inescapable, that her womb was killed, or worse still that only a misbegotten monstrosity was to be expected from it. Only too well did he know the curse, only too well the murderous fury that was wreaked, and would continue to be wreaked, by the dead on women. Again the question tortured him so deeply that he did not dare to pose it … had children been denied to her, or had he and his predecessors only served her lust? His covetous rage against Mother Hentjen mounted, and once more he was in no state of mind to call her by the name by which the dead man called her, and he vowed that that name would not cross his lips until she had understood all that was involved. She did not understand, however. She received him submissively and matter-of-factly, and left him alone in his isolation. He tried to submit to fate; it was not perhaps a question of the child so much as of her readiness to have one, and he waited for some signs of that. But there too she failed him, and when, to prompt her, he dropped a hint that after their marriage they would want to have children, she merely returned a dry and matter-of-fact "Yes," but she did not give him the sign he was waiting for, and in their nights she did not cry that he must give her a child. He beat her, but she did not understand, and remained silent. Until he reached the knowledge that even that would not have availed; for even then the doubt would have remained, the ineluctable doubt whether she might not have begged Herr Hentjen too for a child, and the child whose father he longed to be might just as well have been one from Hentjen's loins as from his. No woman can hope to help a man caught in the despairing agonies of the unprovable. And deeply as he tormented himself, she could only look on in incomprehension; nevertheless it was only an unavailing gesture now, it was only, so to speak, a symbol and an intimation, when he beat her. His resistance was broken.

For he recognized that in the actual world fulfilment could never be achieved, recognized ever more clearly that even the farthest away places lay in the actual world, that all flight thither was senseless, as well as all hope of seeking there sanctuary from death, and fulfilment and freedom—and that the child itself, even if it came alive out of its mother's body, signified nothing more than the fortuitous cry of pleasure with which it was conceived; a dying and long since vanished cry which was of no significance for the existence of the lover who evoked it. The child would be a stranger, strange as that long past cry, strange as the past, strange as the dead and as death, wooden and empty. For unchangeable was the earthly though it might appear to change, and even were the whole world born anew, in spite of the Redeemer's death it would never attain a state of innocence in this life until the end of Time.

True, this knowledge was not very clear, but it sufficed to move Esch to organize his earthly life in Cologne, to seek a decent job and go about his business. Thanks to the excellent credentials which he possessed, he secured a prouder and more responsible position than he had yet occupied, and now once more earned all the pride and admiration which Mother Hentjen kept ready to expend on him. She had the restaurant laid with brown linoleum, and now that the danger of emigration seemed finally to be banished, she herself began to speak of their American castles in the air. He entered into her mood, partly because he felt that she was talking in this way to please him, and partly out of a sense of duty; for though he could hardly hope to see America now, he was resolved never to forsake the way that led towards it, never to turn back in spite of the invisible presence that followed him with the spear ready to strike, and an inward knowledge, hovering between dream and divination, told him that his way was now only a symbol and an intimation of a higher way which one had to walk in reality and in truth, and of which this one was only the earthly reflection, wavering and uncertain as a reflection in a dark pool. All this was not completely clear to him, indeed even the words of holy men, in which fulfilment and the absolute might be sought, did not help him. But he recognized that it was mere chance if the addition of the columns balanced, and so after all he could contemplate the earthly as from a higher coign of vantage, as from an airy castle rising from the plain, shut off from the world and yet open like a mirror to it; and often it seemed to him as though all that had been done or spoken or had come about was no more than a procession on a dimly lit

stage, a representation which was soon forgotten and never palpably present, a thing already past which no one could lay hold on without increasing earthly suffering. For fulfilment always failed one in the actual world, but the way of longing and of freedom was endless and could never be fully trod, was narrow and remote like that of the sleepwalker, though it was also the way which led into the open arms and the living breast of home. So Esch was strange in his love and yet more at home in the earthly world than formerly, so that it made no difference and everything still remained in the super-earthly, even if for the sake of justice much still remained to be done for Ilona in the sphere of the earthly. He talked to Mother Hentjen of America, the land of freedom, and of the sale of the business, and of their marriage, as to a child whom one wants to please, and sometimes he could call her Gertrud again, even if she remained nameless to him in the nights when he lay with her. They went hand in hand, although each walked a different and endless road. When presently they got married, and the business was knocked down for an absurdly low price, these were stations on their symbolical road, yet at the same time stations on the road leading them nearer to the lofty and the eternal, which, if Esch had not been a Freethinker, he might even have called the divine. But he knew nevertheless that here on earth we have all to go our ways on crutches.

IV

When the theatre in Duisburg went bankrupt and both Teltscher and Ilona were once more left destitute, Esch and his wife put almost the whole of what remained of their means into the theatrical business, and soon they had finally lost their money. Yet Esch now secured a post as head book-keeper in a large industrial concern in his Luxemburg home, and for this his wife admired him more than ever. They went their way hand in hand and loved each other. He still sometimes beat her, but less and less, and finally not at all.

Part Three

THE REALIST

(1918)

CHAPTER I

Huguenau, whose forefathers might well have been called Hagenau before Alsace was occupied in 1692 by Condé's troops, had all the characteristics of the town-bred Alemanni. He was thick-set, inclined to be fat, and had worn glasses since his boyhood, or, to be more precise, since the time when he had attended the commercial school in Schlettstadt, and now that he was approaching his thirtieth year at the outbreak of the war he retained no trace of his youth either in face or behaviour. He did business in Baden and Württemberg, partly in branch establishments of his father's textile firm, André Huguenau, Colmar, Alsace, partly on his own account and as a representative of various Alsatian factories for which he acted as agent in that section of the country. In these provincial circles his reputation was that of an energetic, prudent and reliable man of business.

There is no doubt that with his capabilities he would have done better at smuggling, which the times made more profitable, than at soldiering. But he submitted without further ado when in 1917 his extreme shortsightedness was summarily ignored and he received a call to arms, as the phrase went. True, even while he was being trained in Fulda he did manage to wind up a tobacco business here and there, but soon enough he dropped everything. Not only because his military duties made him tired or inapt for other things. It was simply so pleasant not to have to bother about anything at all, and it reminded him vaguely of his schooldays; the boy who was once at school, Huguenau (Wilhelm), could still remember his last Speech Day in the Schlettstadt Academy, and how he and his class-mates had been dedicated by the Head to the serious issues of life, serious issues which hitherto he had coped with well enough and now had to abandon again in favour of a new schooling. Once more he was pinned down to an endless succession of duties that had been forgotten in the course of years, once more he was treated as a pupil and shouted at, had a similar attitude to the common lavatories as in his boyhood, and attached the same importance to food, while the ceremonies of respect and the ambitious competition in which he found himself involved gave a completely infantile stamp to the whole. As if that were not enough, he was quartered in a school building, and before falling asleep could see the two rows of lights with their green-and-white shades and

the blackboard that had been left where it was. All this confused his schooldays and his soldiering days in an inextricable tangle, and even when the battalion set off at last to the Front, singing childish songs and bedecked with little flags, crowded into primitive sleeping-quarters in Cologne and Liège, Huguenau the fusilier could not get rid of the notion that he was on a school excursion.

It was evening when his company moved into the front line. They were posted in a fortified trench which was approached by long covered passage-ways. Unexampled filth reigned in the dug-outs, the floors were covered with spittle both fresh and dry, there were streaks of urine on the walls, and it could not be determined whether the prevailing stench was that of fæces or of corpses. In any case Huguenau was too tired to realize the actual sights and smells around him. Even while trotting in single file through the approach trenches all the men already had the feeling of being outcasts from the sheltering warmth of comradeship and common life, and hardened as they were to the complete lack of cleanliness, little as they missed the conventions of civilization with which humanity seeks to banish the stench of death and corruption, however surely the repression of their disgust advanced them one step towards heroism (a step that links heroism most strangely with love), long as most of them had been accustomed to live among horrors during the years of war, so that they merely joked and swore as they made their beds, yet there was not one among them who did not know that he was posted there as a solitary creature to live alone and to die alone in an overwhelmingly senseless world, so senseless that he could not comprehend it or rise beyond describing it as “this bloody war.”

It was at a time when the various general staffs had reported that in the Flanders section complete quiet prevailed. The company that had just been relieved also asserted that there was nothing doing. And yet as soon as darkness fell the artillery on both sides began a cannonade that was severe enough to banish their weariness from the newcomers. Aching in every bone, Huguenau sat on a kind of camp-bed, and only after a fair length of time did he remark that his limbs were all trembling and twitching. The other men were in no better case. One of them was weeping. Some of the old soldiers, indeed, were merely amused: this was just a game the batteries played every night, it meant nothing, one soon got used to it; and taking no further notice of their weaker brethren they were actually snoring in a minute or two.

Huguenau would have liked to remonstrate with somebody: this was not at all what he had bargained for. Sick and faint as he was, he yearned for fresh air, and when his knees began to tremble less he tottered to the entrance of the dug-out, sat down there on a box and stared with vacant eyes at the firework display in the sky. Time and again he thought he saw the figure of a man flying up to Heaven with one hand raised in an orange cloud. Then he remembered Colmar, and that his school class had been taken one day to be lectured on art in the Museum; it had been rather boring, but there was one picture, standing like an altar in the middle of the floor, that had terrified him. It was, moreover, a Crucifixion. He detested crucifixions. That reminded him that years ago he had had to put in a Sunday in Nürnberg, between visits to customers, and had gone to see the torture chamber. Now that had been interesting. There was a fine collection of pictures too. One of them showed a man chained to a kind of camp-bed, a man who, the inscription said, had murdered a clergyman in Saxony by stabbing him repeatedly with a dagger, and now had to lie on that bed waiting to be broken on the wheel. To be broken on the wheel was a punishment sufficiently explained by other exhibits in the place. The man had a good-humoured expression, and it was just as unimaginable that he had stabbed a pastor and was doomed to be broken on the wheel, as that Huguenau himself should have to sit where he was, on a camp-bed in a stench of corpses. No doubt the man had ached all over too, and was bound to befoul himself since he was chained down. Huguenau spat, and said “Merde!” He went on sitting at the door of the dug-out like a sentry; he leaned his head against a post, he had turned up his coat-collar, he was no longer cold, he was not asleep, but neither was he awake. The torture chamber and the dug-out blended and sank more profoundly into the sordid and yet brilliant colours of Grünewald’s altar-piece, and while in the palpitating orange light of the distant cannonade and the shooting rockets the boughs of naked trees stretched their arms towards Heaven, a man with uplifted hand soared through the illuminated vault of the sky.

When the first grey light of dawn came cold and leaden Huguenau noticed the tufts of grass at the lip of the trench and a few daisies that had survived from last year. So he simply crawled out and made off. He knew that he might be picked off at any moment by the English, and that similar attentions would be paid to him by the German outposts; but the world lay as if under a vacuum glass—Huguenau could not help thinking of a glass cover over cheese—grey, worm-eaten and completely dead in a silence that was inviolable.

CHAPTER II

Bathed in the limpid air that heralds the spring, the deserter made his way unarmed through the Belgian

landscape. Haste would have served him little, prudent caution served him better, and weapons would not have protected him at all; it was, one might say, as a naked man that he slipped through the armed forces. His untroubled face was a better protection than weapons or hurried flight or forged papers.

For the Belgians were suspicious fellows. Four years of war had not improved their disposition. Their corn, their potatoes, their horses and cows had all had to suffer. And when a deserter came to them looking for sanctuary they examined him with twofold suspicion, lest he might be one of the men who had beaten on their doors with a rifle-butt. And even if the fugitive spoke passable French and gave himself out as an Alsatian, in nine cases out of ten that would have availed him little. Woe to the man who strayed into a village merely as a fugitive timidly imploring help! But a man who came like Huguenau with a ready jest on his lips, with a beaming and friendly face, found it easy enough to have beer smuggled to him in the barn, or even to sit with the family of an evening in the kitchen and tell tales of the Prussians' brutality and violence in Alsace; such a stranger was welcomed and got his share of the hoarded provisions; with luck he might even be visited in his bed of hay by one of the maids.

It was still more advantageous, of course, to get into the parsonages, and Huguenau soon discovered that he could manage this by way of the confessional. He made his confessions in French, skilfully grafting an account of his miserable plight on to the admission of his sin in breaking his oath of allegiance. To be sure, the results were not always pleasant. Once he hit upon a priest, a tall lean man so ascetic and passionate in appearance that Huguenau almost shrank from presenting himself at the parsonage on the evening after confession, and when he saw the severe figure busy at spring work in the orchard he felt inclined to turn tail. But the priest came quickly towards him. "Suivez-moi," he said harshly, and led him indoors.

For nearly a week Huguenau stayed there on meagre rations with a bed in the attic. He was given a blue blouse and set to work in the garden; he was awakened for Mass and permitted to eat in the kitchen at the same table as his silent host. Not a word was said of his escape, and the whole affair was like a penance that sat but ill on Huguenau. He had even made up his mind to quit the relative security of his asylum and continue his dangerous flight, when one day—eight days after his arrival—he found a suit of civilian clothes laid out in his attic. He was to accept the suit, said the priest, and he was free to go or to stay as he chose; only he could no longer be boarded there, for there was not sufficient food. Huguenau decided to go on farther, and as he embarked on a lengthy speech of thanks the priest cut him short: "Haïssez les Prussiens et les ennemis de la sainte religion. Et que Dieu vous bénisse." He lifted two fingers in benediction, made the sign of the Cross, and the deep-set eyes in his peasant face gazed with burning hate into a distant region inhabited, presumably, by Prussians and Protestants.

When Huguenau quitted that parsonage it became clear to him that he had to think out a definite plan of escape. Formerly he had often enough hung about in the neighbourhood of various corps headquarters where he passed without comment among the other soldiers, but that had now become impossible. He was really depressed by his civilian clothes; they were like an admonition to return to the work-a-day world of peace, and that he had donned them at the command of the priest seemed now a lapse into stupidity. The priest's offer was an unauthorized interference with his private life, and he had paid dear enough to secure his private life. Besides, even if he did not regard himself as belonging to the Kaiser's forces, yet as a deserter he had a peculiar, one might almost say a negative connection with them, and in any case he belonged to the war and he did not disapprove of the war. For instance, he had not been able to stomach the way in which men in the canteens abused the war and the newspapers, or asserted that Krupp had been buying up newspapers in order to prolong the war. For Wilhelm Huguenau was not only a deserter, he was a man of business, a salesman who admired all factory-owners for producing the wares that the rest of the world used. So if Krupp and the coal barons bought newspapers they knew what they were doing, and had a perfect right to do it, as much right as he had to wear his uniform as long as he pleased. There was no reason, therefore, why he should return to that background of civilian life which the priest with his suit of clothes had obviously destined for him, nothing to induce him to return to his native country in which there were no holidays, and which stood for all that was commonplace.

So he remained in the base lines. He turned southwards, avoiding towns and calling at villages, came through the Hennegau and penetrated to the Ardennes. The war by that time had lost much of its formality, and deserters were no longer closely hunted—there were too many of them, and the authorities did not want to admit their existence. Still, that does not explain how Huguenau got out of Belgium undiscovered; one can attribute it rather to the somnambulistic sureness with which he picked his way through the dangerous zone; he walked along in the clear air of early spring, walked light-heartedly as if under a glass bell, cut off from the world and yet in it, and he was untroubled by reflections. From the Ardennes he crossed into German territory, coming out on the bleak plateau of the Eifel where winter still prevailed and it was difficult to make headway. The inhabitants did not bother about him, they were surly, silent people, and they hated every extra mouth that sought a share of their scanty provender. Huguenau had to take to

the train and break into his savings, hitherto untouched. The serious issues of life threatened him again in a new and different guise. Something had to be done to secure and prolong his holiday.

CHAPTER III

The little town lay girdled by vineyards in a tributary valley of the Moselle. The heights above were crowned by woods. The vineyards were all in trim, with the vine-stocks set in straight lines interrupted at places by outcrops of reddish rock. Huguenau observed with disapproval that many of the owners had not weeded their plots, and that the neglected patches stood out like rectangular yellow islets among the reddish grey soil of the others.

After the last days of winter in the Eifel highlands Huguenau had come down all at once into the real springtime. Like a promise of inalienable order and comfort the sun radiated gay well-being and light security into his heart. Any anxiety that might have lurked there could be thrown off. It was a satisfaction to him to see in the forefront of the town the stately District Hospital with its long façade lying in the morning shadow, he approved the fact that all its windows were open as if it were a southern sanatorium, and he found it pleasant to imagine the light spring airs blowing through the white wards. He approved, too, the large red cross marked on the roof of the hospital, and as he passed by he cast a benevolent glance at the soldiers in their grey hospital uniform, who were convalescing, some in shadow and some in the sun of the garden. Across the river lay the barracks, recognizable by its style of architecture, and a building resembling a monastery which he later discovered to be the prison. But the road sloped down towards the town in a friendly and comfortable manner, and as Huguenau passed through the mediæval town gate, a small fibre case in his hand just like the case of samples he used to carry, it did not even ruffle him that his entry reminded him strongly of similar entries into Württemberg towns which once upon a time—and how long ago it seemed—he had visited on his business rounds.

The streets, too, were so old-fashioned that they reminded him of his compulsory day of rest in Nürnberg. Here in Kur-Trier the war of the Palatinate had not raged with such ruthlessness as in the other regions west of the Rhine. The old fifteenth- and sixteenth-century houses were still intact, and so was the Gothic Town Hall in the market-place, with its Renaissance outworks and the tower before which stood the old pillory. And Huguenau, who had visited many a lovely old town on his commercial rounds, but had remarked none of them, was seized by a novel emotion which he-could not have given a name to or traced to any known source, but which made him feel curiously at home in this town: if it had been described to him as an æsthetic emotion or as an emotion springing from a sense of freedom, he would have laughed incredulously, with the laughter of a man who has never had even an inkling of the beauty of the world, and he would have been right, in so far as nobody can determine whether it is freedom that opens the eyes of the soul to beauty, or beauty that gives the soul its vision of freedom, but yet he would have been wrong, for there was bound to be even in him a deeper human wisdom, a human longing for that freedom in which all the light of the world has its source and that finally creates the Sabbath that hallows life; and since this is so and cannot be otherwise, a gleam of the higher light may well have fallen on Huguenau in that very moment when he crawled out of the trench and shook himself free of human obligations, a gleam of that light which is freedom and which entered even into him and for the first time dedicated him to the Sabbath.

Far removed from speculations of this nature, Huguenau engaged a room in the hotel in the market-place. As if to assure himself that he was still on holiday, he set out to have a jolly evening. The Moselle wine was not rationed and in spite of the war had retained its quality. Huguenau treated himself to three pannikins full and sat long over them. There were citizens all round at the various tables; Huguenau was an alien among them, and here and there hasty questioning glances were directed at him. They all had their business and their preoccupations, and he himself had nothing. None the less he was happy and contented. He was himself amazed: no employment and yet happy! so happy that he found pleasure in recapitulating to himself all the difficulties that would incontestably arise should a man like himself, a stranger without identification papers and without any connections in the town, attempt to set up business and obtain credit. It was extraordinarily funny to imagine the fix he would be in. Perhaps the wine was responsible. Huguenau, at any rate, as he climbed into bed with a somewhat addled head, did not feel like a worried commercial traveller, but like a merry and light-hearted tourist.

CHAPTER IV

When Gödicke, a bricklayer in the Landwehr, was unearthed from the ruins of his trench, his mouth, gaping as if for a scream, was filled with earth. His face was a blackish blue, and he had no discernible heart-beat. Had not the two ambulance men who found him made a bet about his survival he would simply

have been re-buried immediately. That he was fated to see the sun again and the sunny world, he owed to the ten cigarettes which the winner of the bet was due to receive.

He could not be said to have revived under artificial respiration, although both men toiled and sweated over him, but they carried him off and observed him closely, abusing him from time to time because he so obstinately refused to solve the riddle of his life, the riddle of his death; and they were tireless in shoving him under the doctors' noses. So the object of their bet lay for four whole days in a field hospital without moving and with a blackened skin. Whether during this time a dim flicker of infinitesimal slumbering life began to glimmer and was fanned with pain and anguish through the wreck of the body, or whether it was a faint and ecstatic pulsing on the verge of a great beyond, we do not know and Gödicke of the Landwehr could not have told.

For it was only piecemeal, half a cigarette at a time, so to speak, that the life returned to his body, and this slow caution was both proper and natural, since what his crushed body demanded was the utmost immobility. For many long days Ludwig Gödicke must have fancied himself the child in swaddling-clothes that he had been forty years before, constricted by an incomprehensible restraint and feeling nothing save the restraint. And if he had been capable of it he might well have whimpered for his mother's breast, and as a matter of fact he soon did begin to whimper. It was during the journey, and his whimpering was like the incessant mewling of a newly born child; nobody was willing to lie next to him, and one night another patient even threw something at him. That was during the time when everyone believed that he would have to die of hunger, since it was impossible for the doctors to find a way of introducing nourishment into him. That he went on living was inexplicable, and the Surgeon-Major's opinion that his body had nourished itself on all the bruised blood under the skin was scarcely worth calling an opinion, let alone a theory. The lower part of his body in especial was terribly injured. He was laid in a cold pack, but whether that alleviated his sufferings at all could not be determined. But it was possible that he had ceased to suffer so much, for the whimpering gradually died away. Until a few days later it broke out again more strongly: it was now—or one may imagine that it was—as if Ludwig Gödicke were recovering his soul only in single fragments, and as if each fragment came to him on a wave of agony. It may be that that was so, even though it cannot be proved; it may be that the anguish of a soul that has been torn and pulverized into atoms and must join itself together again is greater than any other anguish, keener than the anguish of a brain that quivers under renewed spasms of cramp, keener than all the bodily suffering that accompanies the process.

Thus Gödicke of the Landwehr lay in his bed on rubber air-cushions, and while it was impossible to nurse his battered body, while food was slowly injected in minute doses, his soul collected itself; to the bewilderment of Doctor Kühlenbeck, the Senior Medical Officer, to the bewilderment of Doctor Flurschütz, to the bewilderment of Sister Carla, his soul collected itself with agony around the core of his ego.

CHAPTER V

Huguenau woke up early. He was an energetic man. A decent bedroom; no garret such as he had had with the priest; a good bed. Huguenau scratched his leg. Then he tried to find his bearings.

A hotel; the market-place; and the Town Hall was facing him.

There were really many inducements for him to go back and take up the threads of his life again in the place where they had been dropped; there were many reasons why he should do his duty as a business man and pick up easy money as an agent for butter and textiles. Yet the very idea of casks of butter and sacks of coffee and bales of textiles was so repugnant to him that he was himself surprised,—and the repugnance was really a matter for surprise to a man who since his boyhood had thought and spoken of nothing but money and trading. And the thought of being on holiday from school came up again most amazingly. Huguenau found it pleasanter to meditate on the town he happened to be in.

Behind the town were the vineyards. And in many of them were weeds. The owner had probably been killed in the war or was a prisoner. His wife could not manage the work alone, or was running round with another man. Besides, the price of wine was controlled by the State. Unless one could sell wine on the sly it wasn't worth while to tend the vineyard. But the wines were of fine quality; they actually went a little to one's head.

A war widow like that would really be glad to sell her vineyard cheap.

Huguenau began to think of possible buyers for stocks of Moselle. One should be able to find them. One could make a good bit of commission on the deal. Wine-shippers were the people. Friedrichs' in Cologne, Matter & Co. in Frankfort. He had delivered pipes of wine to them before.

He jumped out of bed. His plan was made.

He tidied himself before the looking-glass. Combed his hair back. It had grown long since the company's barber had shaved it. Now when had that been? It seemed to be in a former life; if it weren't that hair grew

slowly in winter he would have had a fine mane. When a man is dead his hair and nails go on growing. Huguenau took a strand of his hair and pulled it down over his forehead. It reached almost to the point of his nose. No, a man couldn't go about in that state. One always had one's hair cut just before a holiday. True, this wasn't a holiday. But it wasn't so very unlike one.

The morning was bright. A little chilly.

There were two yellow armchairs with black-leather seats in the barber's shop. The barber himself, a shaky old man, tied the not-very-clean overall round Huguenau's neck, and tucked a roll of paper into his collar. Huguenau moved his chin a little to and fro; the paper rasped him.

There was a newspaper hanging on a hook and Huguenau asked for it. It was the local *Kur-Trier Herald*, with a supplement on "Farming and Viniculture in the Moselle District." That was exactly what he needed.

He sat motionless, studying the paper, and then he looked at himself in the glass; he could easily have passed for one of the more solid citizens in the place. His hair was now cut as he liked it, short, respectable, and German. On top of his head a few strands of longer hair were left to make a parting. The next thing was to be shaved.

The barber whipped up a thin lather that spread cold and sparingly over Huguenau's face. The soap was no good.

"The soap's not up to much," said Huguenau. The barber made no reply, but stropped his razor. Huguenau was offended, but after a while said excusingly: "War goods."

The barber began to shave. With short, scraping strokes. He did it badly. Still, it was pleasant to be shaved. Shaving oneself was one of the conditions of war. Cheaper, too; but for once in a while it was pleasant to have it done for one. More like a holiday. There was a picture of a girl hanging on the wall with a lavish display of bosom, and beneath her were the words "Lotion Houbigant." Huguenau had laid back his head and let the paper hang in his idle hands. The barber was now shaving his chin and throat; was he never going to finish? Well, Huguenau didn't care; he had plenty of time. And to put off time a little longer he ordered a "Lotion Houbigant." What he got was eau-de-Cologne.

Freshly shaved, a clean-shaven spruce man with the scent of eau-de-Cologne in his nose, Huguenau walked back to the inn. When he took off his hat he sniffed at the lining. It smelt of pomade, and that too was satisfactory.

There was no one in the dining-room. Huguenau got his coffee and the maid brought out a bread-card from which she snipped a portion. There was no butter, only a blackish syrupy kind of jam. Nor was the coffee real coffee, and while he sipped the hot liquid Huguenau reckoned up how much profit the manufacturers were making on their coffee-substitute; he reckoned it up without envy and approved it. In any case buying wine cheap in the Moselle district was just as profitable a venture, an excellent investment. And when he had finished his breakfast he set about drawing up an advertisement offering to buy wines of good quality. Then he took it along to the office of the *Kur-Trier Herald.*

CHAPTER VI

The District Hospital had become entirely a military hospital. Dr Friedrich Flurschütz was making his round of the wards. He was wearing a military cap with his doctor's white overall; a combination which Lieutenant Jaretzki characterized as absurd.

Jaretzki had been put into Officers' Room III. That had been pure chance, for these double-bedded rooms were supposed to be reserved for Staff Officers, but once he was in he stayed there. He was sitting on the edge of his bed with a cigarette in his mouth when Flurschütz came in, and his arm in its unwrapped bandage was lying on the bedside table.

"Well, how are we, Jaretzki?"

Jaretzki indicated his arm:

"The Surgeon-Major's just been in."

Flurschütz looked at the arm and touched it cautiously here and there:

"A bad business … gone a bit further?"

"Yes, an inch or so … the old man wants to amputate."

The arm lay there inflamed and reddish, the palm of the hand swollen, the fingers like red sausages, and round the wrist a ring of purulent blisters.

Jaretzki regarded his arm and said:

"Poor thing, look at it lying there."

"Don't worry about it, it's only the left."

"Yes, all you want to do is to cut things off."

Flurschütz shrugged his shoulders:

“Can’t be helped; this century has been devoted to surgery and rewarded by a world-war with guns … now we’re beginning to find out about glands, and by the time the next war comes along we’ll be able to do wonders with these damned gas-poisonings … but for the present the only thing we can do is cut.”

Jaretzki said:

“The next war? Don’t tell me you believe that this one’s ever going to come to an end.”

“I don’t need to be a prophet to do that, Jaretzki, the Russians have given it up already.”

Jaretzki laughed bitterly:

“God preserve you in your childish faith and send us decent cigarettes.…”

With his sound right hand he had drawn a packet of cigarettes from the open shelf under the drawer of the table and now offered it to Flurschütz.

Flurschütz pointed to the ash-tray full of cigarette-butts:

“You shouldn’t smoke so much.…”

Sister Mathilde came in.

“Well, do we bind it up again … what’s your opinion, Doctor?”

Sister Mathilde was looking well. She had freckles on her forehead. Flurschütz said:

“It’s a bad business, this gas.”

He stayed to watch the Sister binding up the arm and then he went on his rounds again. At both ends of the broad corridor the windows were wide open, but no current of air could blow away the hospital smell.

CHAPTER VII

The house lay in Fischerstrasse, one of the side-streets leading down to the river, a timbered edifice in which, it was obvious, all sorts of handicrafts had been carried on for centuries. Beside the door there was a black battered tin plate with the words in faded gold-lettering: *“Kur-Trier Herald*, Editorial and Business Office (in the courtyard).”

Penetrating through the narrow passage-like entry, where in the darkness he stumbled over the trap-door leading down to the cellar, and passing an opening that gave on the stairs leading to the dwelling-house, Huguenau found himself in an unexpectedly spacious courtyard shaped somewhat like a horseshoe. A garden adjoined the courtyard; there a few cherry-trees were in blossom, and beyond the garden one’s gaze was lost in the lovely mountain country.

The whole place witnessed to the semi-peasant character of its former possessor. The two wings had certainly served as granaries and stables; the left one had two storeys, and there was a steep and narrow wooden ladder on the outer wall; probably the top floor had once been the servants’ quarters. The upper storey of the stable buildings on the right was a hayloft, and one of the stable doors had been displaced by a large business-like barred window, behind which a printing-press could be seen at work.

From the man at the printing-press Huguenau learned that Herr Esch was to be found on the first floor opposite.

So Huguenau climbed the wooden steps and found himself plump before a door with the inscription, “Editorial and Business Office,” behind which Herr Esch, owner and publisher of the *Kur-Trier Herald*, exercised his functions. He was a lean man with a clean-shaven face in which, between two long and deep furrows running down the cheeks, a mouth as mobile as an actor’s grimaced sarcastically, showing a set of strong yellowish teeth. He had something of the actor about him, something of the clergyman, and something of the horse.

The advertisement which Huguenau handed to him he scrutinized with the air of an examining magistrate considering a document. Huguenau took out his pocket-book, from which he extracted a five-mark note, as a hint, so to speak, that he was prepared to allot that sum for the insertion of the advertisement. But the other, paying not the least attention to this, asked abruptly: “So you’re out to exploit the people round about here, are you? I suppose the poverty of our winegrowers is common talk already—heh?”

It was an unprovoked attack, and Huguenau decided that its purpose was to force up the price for inserting the advertisement. He produced therefore another mark, but that merely had the opposite effect from what he had wished: “Thanks … you can keep your advertisement.… Evidently you don’t appreciate what it means to corrupt the Press … let me tell you, you won’t corrupt me with your six marks, nor with ten, nor with a hundred!”

Huguenau became more and more certain that he was dealing with a sharp business man. But simply for that reason it was imperative that he should not give way; perhaps the man was waiting for him to suggest going shares in the venture, and after all that arrangement would not be without its advantages.

“Hm, I’ve heard that these advertisement deals are sometimes made on a percentage basis—how about a half-per-cent commission on the results? Of course in that case you would have to insert the announcement three separate times at least … still, you’re quite at liberty to insert it oftener than that, when it’s a matter of generosity I impose no limits …” he risked a confidential laugh and sat down beside the rough kitchen table which served Herr Esch as a desk.

Esch paid no attention to him, but with a morose and suffering face walked from side to side of the room in a heavy awkward step which did not go with his lank appearance. The scrubbed floor creaked under his clumsy tread, and Huguenau contemplated the holes and loosened plaster between the two rooms, as well as Herr Esch’s heavy black shoes, which were fastened, instead of with laces, with queer thongs that reminded one of saddle-straps; over the tops of the shoes bulged an expanse of grey darned sock. Esch communed aloud with himself: “The vultures are hovering over those poor people already … but when you try to draw public attention to all the misery, you find yourself up against the censorship.”

Huguenau had crossed his legs. He regarded the things scattered on the table. An empty coffee-cup with brown stains, now dry, a bronze replica of the Statue of Liberty in New York (aha, a paper-weight), a paraffin lamp whose white wick behind the glass funnel reminded one distantly and dimly of a fœtus or a tapeworm preserved in spirits. Now Esch’s voice boomed from the opposite corner:

“The censorship people should be made to look at all the misery and the distress themselves … it’s to me that the people come … it would be simple treachery if …”

On a rickety shelf some manuscripts were lying, along with piles of newspapers tied together. Esch had resumed his prowling. In the middle of one of the walls, which were distempered in yellow, hung on a fortuitous nail a small faded picture in a black frame, “Badenweiler and the Schlossberg”; probably it was an old picture postcard. Huguenau reflected that a picture or a bronze statuette like that would look very well in his office. But when he tried to recall to his memory that office, and what he had done in it, he was unsuccessful, it seemed so remote and strange that he gave up the attempt, and his eyes sought again the excitable Esch, whose brown-velvet jacket and light cloth trousers went just as badly with his clumsy shoes as the bronze statuette on the kitchen table. Esch must have felt his glance, for he shouted:

“Damn it all, why do you go on sitting here?”

Of course Huguenau could have gone away—but where? it was not so easy to hit on another project. Huguenau felt that unknown powers had launched him on these new rails, and that he could not afford to leave them without a struggle, nor indeed without suffering for it. So he remained quietly sitting and polished his eyeglasses, as he was in the habit of doing during difficult commercial negotiations to maintain an air of composure. Nor did it fail of its effect this time, for Esch, exasperated now, planted himself in front of Huguenau and burst out anew:

“Where have you come from, anyway? Who sent you here? … you don’t belong to this part of the country, and you needn’t tell me that you intend to set up here as a wine-grower yourself.… You’re just here to spy. Locked up, that’s what you should be!”

Huguenau gazed at Esch’s brown-velvet waistcoat, which was just at the level of his eye and showed a strip of leather belt beneath it, gazed at the light-coloured trousers spotted with grease. Past dry-cleaning, thought Huguenau, he’ll have to have them dyed black, I should tell him so; what is he really after? if he really wants to throw me out he has no need to provoke a quarrel first … so he wants me to stay, then. There was something queer about it. Somehow Huguenau felt a sort of fellow-feeling with this man, and at the same time divined that there was some profit to be made. So returning to the attack he resolved to make certain:

“Herr Esch, I’ve offered you an honourable deal, and if you decide to refuse it that’s your business. But if you merely want to swear at me, then there’s no point in continuing our conversation.”

He snapped his eyeglasses together and raised his bottom slightly from the chair, indicating by this movement that he was ready to go away—Esch had only to say the word.

But now Esch seemed really to have no wish to break off the conversation; he raised his hand propitiatingly, and Huguenau, once more using his bottom as an indicator, signified that he would remain:

“To tell you the truth, it’s unlikely that I’ll set up as a wine-grower here myself; perhaps you were quite right there—although even that isn’t out of the question; a fellow longs for a quiet life. But I’m not here to exploit anyone,” he wrought himself up, “a middleman has as much title to respect as anybody else, all that he’s concerned with is to bring two parties together in a deal and satisfy them both, for then he has his reward too. Besides I must ask you to be a little more careful in the way you fling about expressions like ‘spy,’ that’s a dangerous game in war-time.”

Esch was put to shame:

“Come, come, I didn’t intend any offence … but sometimes your disgust at things rises into your throat, and then you can’t keep it from bursting out.… A Cologne builder, a thorough swindler, has been buying up

land here for a mere song … driven the people out of their homes … and the chemist here has been following his example … what use can Paulsen the chemist have for vineyards? can you tell me that, perhaps?"

Huguenau said again in an offended voice:

"A spy.…"

Esch had once more resumed his prowling:

"One should emigrate. Somewhere or other. To America. If I were younger I would fling everything up and start all over again …" once more he halted before Huguenau, "but you're a young man—why aren't you at the Front, eh? how do you come to be wandering about here?" Suddenly he had become aggressive again. Well, Huguenau had no desire to enter into that question; he evaded it; it was quite incomprehensible to him, he said, that a man in a distinguished position, the proprietor and editor of a newspaper, living amid lovely surroundings and enjoying the esteem of his fellow-citizens, and no longer young besides, should cherish thoughts of emigrating.

Esch grimaced sarcastically:

"Esteem of my fellow-citizens, esteem of my fellow-citizens … they snarl at my heels like a pack of curs.…"

Huguenau glanced at the picture of the Schlossberg, then he said:

"I can hardly believe that."

"Indeed! perhaps you're on their side? that wouldn't surprise me …"

Huguenau steered his craft into safer waters:

"Again these vague accusations, Herr Esch. Won't you at least express yourself more precisely, if you have anything against me?"

But Herr Esch's desultory and irascible mind was not so easy to curb:

"Express myself precisely, express myself precisely, it's very easy to talk like that … as if a man can give a name to everything …" he shouted in Huguenau's face. "Young man, until you know that all names are false you know nothing; not even the clothes on your body are what they seem to be."

An uncanny feeling came over Huguenau. He didn't understand that, he said.

"Of course you don't understand it … but when a chemist snaps up land for a song, you can understand that all right … and it's quite understandable to you that a man who calls things by their real names should be persecuted and slandered as a communist … and be set upon by the Censor, what? that seems quite right to you?… and I suppose you think too that we're living in a just country?"

It was a disagreeable position to be in, said Huguenau.

"Disagreeable! One should emigrate … I'm sick of struggling against it."

Huguenau asked what Herr Esch thought of doing with the paper.

Esch waved his hand contemptuously: he had often said to his wife that he would like to sell the whole show, but he would keep the house—he had thoughts of opening a bookshop.

"The opposition must have damaged the paper a good deal, I suppose, Herr Esch? I mean to say, the circulation can't amount to very much now?"

Not at all, the *Herald* had its regular subscribers, the restaurants, the hairdressers, above all the people in the villages round about: the opposition was confined to certain circles in the town. But he was sick of squabbling with them.

Had Herr Esch any idea as to the price he wanted?

Oh yes … the paper and the printing-office were worth 20,000 marks, and a bargain at the price. In addition he would let the buyer have the use of the buildings rent-free for an extended period, say five years: and that would mean a big advantage for the buyer too. That was how he had figured it out, it was a decent offer, he didn't want to overreach anybody, he was simply sick of the whole business. He had often said so to his wife.

"Well," said Huguenau, "I didn't ask out of idle curiosity … as I said before I'm a middleman, and perhaps I may be able to do something for you. Mark my words, my dear Esch," and he patronizingly clapped the newspaper proprietor on the bony shoulder—"we'll do a little business deal together yet; you should never be in too great a hurry to throw anyone out. All the same you must put the thought of twenty thousand out of your head. Nobody pays fancy prices nowadays."

Self-assured and in excellent spirits Huguenau clattered down the wooden steps.

A child was squatting in front of the printing-shed.

Huguenau contemplated the child, contemplated the entrance to the printing-shed; he saw "No Admittance except on Business" on the door-plate.

Twenty thousand marks, he thought, and the little girl thrown in.

Well, he had no business in there yet, but from now on they could not refuse him admittance; if you were

trying to sell a concern you had a right to see it. Esch would be obliged to show him round the printing-shed. Huguenau considered whether he should shout to him to come down, but then he decided, no: in a couple of days he would be returning here in any case, perhaps even with concrete proposals for buying the place,—Huguenau was quite certain of it, and besides it was dinner-time now. So he betook himself to his hotel.

CHAPTER VIII

Hanna Wendling was awake. She did not open her eyes, however, for there was still a chance that she might catch her vanishing dream. But it glided slowly away, and finally nothing remained but the emotion in which it had been immersed. As the emotion too drained away, Hanna voluntarily abandoned it just an instant before it completely vanished and glanced across at the window. Through the slats of the venetian blinds oozed a milky light; it must still be early, or else the sky was overcast. The striped light was like a continuation of her dream, perhaps because no sound entered with it, and Hanna decided that it must be very early after all. The venetian blinds stirred with a soft swaying motion between the open casements; that must be the dawn wind, and she inhaled its coolness by sniffing delicately, as if her nose could tell her what time it was. Then with closed eyes she reached out her hand to the bed on her left; it was not occupied; the pillows, the blankets and the eiderdown quilt were methodically piled up and covered by the plush counterpane. Before she drew back her hand, so as to return it along with her naked shoulder beneath the warm sheets, she ran it again over the yielding and slightly cold plush, and the action was like a corroboration of the fact that she was alone. Her thin nightgown had slipped up over her thighs and formed an uncomfortable bunch. Ah, she had slept badly again; as a sort of indemnification, however, her right hand was lying on her warm smooth body, and her finger-tips stroked softly and almost imperceptibly the soft downy curve of her bosom. She could not help thinking of some French rococo picture of dalliance; then she remembered Goya's portrait of the disrobed Maya. She remained lying in this position for a few minutes longer. Thereupon she smoothed down her nightgown—strange that a film-thin gown could warm one immediately like that—considered whether she should turn on her left or her right side, decided for the latter, as though she were afraid that the piled-up bed beside her would cut off the air, listened for a little longer to the silence of the street, and gave herself up to another dream, sought refuge in another dream, before any sound could reach her from outside.

When an hour later she once more found herself awake, she could no longer conceal from herself that the forenoon was already far advanced. For anyone who is bound only by very frail threads, threads that are scarcely palpable to him, to what other people or he himself calls life, getting up in the morning is always a hard task. Perhaps even a slight violation. And Hanna Wendling, who felt the unavoidable day once more approaching, got a headache. It began at the back of her head; she crossed her hands behind her neck, and when she tugged at her hair, which softly coiled round her fingers, for a moment she forgot her headache. Then she pressed against the place where the pain was; it was a throbbing which began behind her ears and ran down to the top of her spine. She was used to it. When she was in company, sometimes it seized her so violently that she became quite dizzy. With sudden resolution she flung back the bedclothes, slipped her feet into her high-heeled bedroom slippers, opened the venetian blinds without pulling them up, and holding her hand-glass behind her head contemplated the painful area at the back of her neck in the large mirror on her toilet-table. What was hurting her there? nothing could be seen. She turned her head from side to side; she could see the play of her spine under the skin; really she had a pretty neck. And her shoulders were pretty too. She would have liked to have had her breakfast in bed, but it was war-time; bad enough to have stayed in bed so late. Really she should have got up and taken her little son to school. Every day she made up her mind to do it. Twice she had actually done it, and then had left it again to the maid. Of course the boy should have had a French or an English governess long ago. Englishwomen made the best governesses. Once the war was over they would have to send the boy to England. When she was his age, yes when she was seven, she spoke French better than German. She searched for the flask with the toilet-vinegar, rubbed her neck and temples, and examined her eyes attentively in the mirror: they were golden-brown, in the left one a tiny red vein could be seen. That came from her restless night. She threw her kimono round her shoulders. And then she rang for the maid.

Hanna Wendling was the wife of Dr Heinrich Wendling, advocate. She was a native of Frankfort. For two years Heinrich Wendling had been in Roumania or Bessarabia or somewhere at the back of beyond.

CHAPTER IX

Huguenau sat down at his table in the dining-room. At a table not far from him a white-haired gentleman

was sitting, a major. The waitress had just set down a plate of soup before him, and the old gentleman now went through a curious pantomime; with his hands folded and his reddish face piously composed he bowed his head a little over the table, and only after having ended this unmistakable grace did he break his fast.

Huguenau gaped at this unusual spectacle; he beckoned the waitress and asked without much ceremony who the strange officer was.

The waitress put her mouth to his ear; that was the Town Commandant, a high-born landowner from West Prussia who had been recalled to service for the duration of the war. His family were still living on the estate at home, but he got letters from them every day. Oh, and the Commandant's office was in the Town Hall, but the Herr Major had lived in the hotel ever since the beginning of the war.

Huguenau nodded, his curiosity satisfied. But then he suddenly felt a cold contraction in his stomach, and it struck him that the man sitting over there embodied the power of the army, that the man needed only to stretch out the hand now gripping a soup-spoon and he would be done for, and that therefore he was, so to speak, living next door to his own executioner. His appetite was gone! hadn't he better countermand his order and take to flight?

But meanwhile the waitress had brought his soup, and as he mechanically spooned it up the paralysing coldness relaxed, passing over into an almost comforting cool lassitude and defencelessness. Besides, he daren't run away, he had to finish the deal with the *Kur-Trier Herald*.

He felt almost relieved. For although every man believes that his decisions and resolutions involve the most multifarious factors, in reality they are a mere oscillation between flight and longing, and the ultimate goal of all flight and all longing is death. And in this wavering of the soul and the spirit between the positive and the negative poles, Huguenau, the same Wilhelm Huguenau who a moment before had dreamt of flight, now felt himself strangely drawn to the old man sitting at the other table.

He ate mechanically, not even noticing that to-day was meat day; he drank mechanically, and in the extreme and as it were more clairvoyant state of awareness to which he had had access for the past weeks, all things fell asunder, flew apart and receded to the poles, receded to the frontiers of the world where things once more regain their oneness and distance is annihilated,—fear was changed to longing, and longing to fear, and the *Kur-Trier Herald* coalesced into an extraordinarily indissoluble unity with the white-haired Major. The matter cannot be put much more precisely or rationally than this, for Huguenau's actions now developed in a world where all measurable distance was annihilated, they were in a way short-circuited into irrationality without any time for reflection; so while he waited for the Major to finish his meal, it was not really waiting, it was a sort of simultaneity of cause and effect that made him rise at the very moment when the Major, after another silent grace, pushed back his chair and lit his cigar; forthwith and without the slightest embarrassment Huguenau approached the Major, walked up straight to the Major, quite unembarrassed although he had no pretext whatever for such an intrusion.

Yet hardly had he duly introduced himself than he sat down without being asked and the words began to flow effortlessly from his lips: he took the liberty of respectfully announcing that he was from the Press Bureau and had been sent here at its instructions. It seemed that there was a local sheet here called the *Kur-Trier Herald*, about whose policy all sorts of doubtful rumours were going round, and he had come, furnished with the fullest powers required, to study the position on the spot. Yes, and—what shall I say now? thought Huguenau—but his stream of eloquence flowed on; it was as though the words took shape in his mouth—yes, and seeing that the question of censorship fell to a certain degree and in a certain sense within the Town Commandant's province, he had considered it his duty to wait on the Herr Major and report himself.

In the course of this announcement the Major, drawing himself up with a little jerk, had assumed a formal attitude, and attempted to make the objection that the usual official channels were better suited to deal with such an affair; Huguenau, however, who could not afford to let his fluent stream of words run dry, scarcely listened to him, and summarily dismissed the objection by pointing out that he had approached the Herr Major not in an official, but merely in a semi-official capacity, since the full powers he had mentioned were not from the Government, but rather from the patriotic big industrialists—he need mention no names, they were well enough known—who had entrusted him with the mission of eventually purchasing doubtful newspapers if the price were reasonable, for they must of course prevent suspicious ideas reaching the people. And Huguenau repeated again the words, "suspicious ideas reaching the people," repeated them as though this return to his starting-point had given him absolute assurance, as though the phrase were a soft bed on which he could lie in comfort.

Apparently the Major did not understand what all this was leading to, but he nodded and Huguenau continued to revolve in his orbit: yes, it was a question of suspect newspapers, and in his own opinion, as indeed according to general opinion, the *Kur-Trier Herald* was a suspect paper, whose purchase he would unconditionally recommend.

He looked at the Major triumphantly, drummed with his fingers on the table, and it was as though he were awaiting the Town Commandant's admiration and praise for a successfully achieved feat.

"Very patriotic, no doubt," the Major at length agreed. "I thank you for the information."

With that Huguenau could have taken himself off, but it was necessary that he should achieve something more, and so he thanked the Herr Major warmly for the good will he had shown him and, in view of that good will, begged to add one more request, a small request:

"My employers naturally regard it as important that in buying a newspaper such as this, which of course must be looked on more or less as a local paper, local people interested should share in the transaction: that of course is quite understandable, for the sake of local control and so forth.… The Herr Major sees that?"

Yes, that was understandable, said the Major, not understanding in the least.

Well, said Huguenau, the request he had to make was that the Herr Major, who of course had the greatest prestige of anyone in the town, should give him the names of a few reliable moneyed gentlemen among the residents—of course in the strictest confidence—who might be interested in the plan.

The Major remarked that the whole business really fell within the province of the civil authorities and not of the military command, yet he could give Herr Huguenau one piece of advice: to be here on Friday evening, for on that evening he would always find a few town councillors and other influential gentlemen in the place.

"Splendid! but the Herr Major will be here too, I hope," said Huguenau, who was not to be put off so easily. "Splendid! If the Herr Major will take the transaction under his patronage I can guarantee that everything will go smoothly, especially as the capital required is relatively small, and many of the gentlemen here will be interested no doubt in the idea of getting into touch with the large industries, in being admitted to partnership with them, so to speak.… Splendid! really splendid! … May I smoke, Herr Major?" … and he pulled his chair nearer, took a cigar out of his cigar-case, polished his eyeglasses, and began to smoke.

The Major observed that certainly the auspices were very favourable, and that he was sorry he was not a business man.

Oh, that didn't matter, said Huguenau, that didn't affect the matter at all. And as he felt a need to repeat his performance again, perhaps out of pure virtuosity, perhaps to establish his newly won confidence, perhaps out of sheer wantonness, he pulled his chair yet a little nearer to the Major, and begged permission to add a further piece of information, but only for the Herr Major's personal ear. In his dealings thus far with the publisher of this newspaper—his name was Esch, the Herr Major must certainly have heard of him—well he had got the definite impression that behind the paper there was a—how could he put it? a whole subterranean movement going on, a movement composed of suspicious and subversive elements. Something of this seemed to have leaked out already: but when the plan of buying the paper was actually realized, he would of course be in a position to get that insight into these obscure activities which it was desirable and necessary to have in the interests of the whole people.

And before the old gentleman could reply, Huguenan got up and said in conclusion:

"Please, oh, please, Herr Major!… it's simply my duty as a patriot … not worth mentioning.… So I'll take the liberty, then, of accepting your most flattering invitation for Friday evening."

He clicked his heels and went back with a light, almost jaunty step to his own table.

CHAPTER X

The fact that Herr August Esch's editorial duties filled him with such impatience and exasperation, and that he felt so strangely uncomfortable in his position, may be comprehensively referred back to the other fact that all his life he had followed the vocation of a book-keeper, having been, indeed, a head book-keeper for many years in a large industrial concern in his Luxemburg home, before—it was already in the middle of the war—he took possession of the *Kur-Trier Herald* and the buildings attached to it, as the result of an unexpected legacy.

For a book-keeper, and a head book-keeper in particular, is a man who lives within a strict and extraordinarily exact system of rules, rules so exact that he will never be able to apply them in any other kind of occupation. Supported firmly by such rules, he grows acclimatized to an all-powerful and yet modest world in which everything has its place, in which he himself is the point of reference, and where his glance remains unerring and undisturbed. He turns the pages of the ledger and compares them with the journal and the daybook; without a break numberless bridges stretch from the one to the other, giving security to life and the day's work. Each morning the janitor or the office girl brings the new book-keeping entries from the order office, and the head book-keeper summarizes them, so that the junior clerks may enter them in the daybook. This done, the head book-keeper is at liberty to reflect in peace on the more

difficult problems, to examine the books and give his decisions. Then if in his head he has disentangled and straightened out a particularly difficult book-keeping problem, he sees new and approved bridges once more stretching reciprocally from continent to continent, and this intricate maze of established connections between account and account, this inextricable and yet so clearly woven net, in which not a single knot is missing, is symbolized at last in a single figure which he already foresees, though it may not go into the balance sheet for months to come. Oh, sweet agitation of the final balance! no matter whether it show a gain or a loss; for to the book-keeper all transactions bring gain and satisfaction. Even the monthly trial balances are triumphs of power and skill, yet they are nothing when compared with the general settlement of the books at the end of the half-year: during those days he is the captain of the ship, and his hand never leaves the helm; the young clerks in his department stick to their posts like galley slaves, and no one heeds the dinner-hour, or thinks of sleep, until all the accounts are balanced; but the drawing up of the profit and loss account and the final balance sheet he reserves for himself, and when he has achieved his task, and ruled the last line beneath the account, he seals his labours with his signature. But woe if the balance is out even by so much as a penny! A new, but bitter pleasure follows. Aided by his chief assistant he goes through the suspected accounts with the eye of a detective, and if that is of no avail all the entries of the last half-year are ruthlessly scrutinized yet again. And woe to the young man in whose books the error is found,—wrath and cold contempt will be his portion, yea dismissal. If meanwhile, however, it is discovered that the error has occurred not in the books but in the stocktaking in the storeroom, then the head book-keeper simply shrugs his shoulders, and his lips wear a pitying or sarcastic smile, for the stocktaking lies outside his province, and moreover he knows that in the store, as in life, that perfect order can never be achieved which he maintains in his books. With a contemptuous wave of the hand he returns to his office, and when presently the days become more tranquil, not seldom it may be the head book-keeper's good fortune, while flinging open a ledger, smoothing out the page rapidly with his thumb, running down a column of figures to check it, proud meanwhile of his skill which in spite of the sureness of his smoothly proceeding calculations permits his thoughts to stray freely to distant things—it may be his good fortune to realize with delighted surprise, expected and yet enchanting surprise, that the miracle of calculation still exists like a sure rock in an incalculable world. But then, it may be, his hand slips down from the page, and sadness steals into his heart as he thinks of the new system which it is one of the duties of a modern book-keeper to inaugurate; and reflecting that the new system is an affair of matter-of-fact cards instead of imposing and massive tomes, superseding personal skill by adding-machines, he is filled with bitterness.

Outside their work book-keepers are irritable. For the frontier between reality and unreality in life can never be clearly drawn, and a man who lives within a world of precisely adjusted relations will refuse to allow that there can be another world whose relations are incomprehensible and inscrutable to him: so when he steps out of his firmly established world or is torn from it he becomes impatient, he becomes an ascetic and passionate fanatic, even a rebel. The shadow of death has touched him, and the one-time book-keeper—if he has grown old—is really fit for nothing but the petty existence of the superannuated, and, impervious to accident and all the life round him, can be content to water his garden and attend to his fruit-trees; but if he is still vigorous and eager for work, his life becomes a galling combat with a world of reality which to him is unreal. Especially if fate or a legacy has deposited him in such an exposed position as that of a newspaper editor, even though it may be only a small provincial newspaper that he controls! For there is certainly no occupation so dependent on the uncalculability and uncertainty of the world's affairs as that of an editor, particularly in times of war when report and counter-report, hope and despair, heroism and misery, tread so closely on one another's heels that any methodical keeping of the books becomes a sheer impossibility; only by referring to the Censor's office can one establish what is to pass for truth and what must remain in the realm of untruth, and each nation lives enclosed in its own patriotic reality. Here a book-keeper is very much out of place, for he may easily be tempted to write that our brave troops are still posted on the left banks of the Marne awaiting orders for a further advance, while in reality the French, on their side, have long since pushed forward to the right bank. And if the censorship should reprimand him for such falsehoods, the book-keeper, especially if he is a man of impetuous moods, will inevitably get into a rage and point out that while General Headquarters had indeed reported the fortification of the bridgehead on the left bank, nothing at all had been said of the withdrawal of the troops. This is only one instance among many, one may even say among hundreds, and they are sufficient to show amply how impossible it is to apply to entries in the annals of history that scrupulosity which is accepted as the first and absolute condition of the registration of business events, and how the inaccuracy of a war which it has become impossible to survey as a whole may nourish a spirit of rebellion, for which a precise and scrupulous man might have found excuse enough even in times of peace, but which now must develop of necessity into an inevitable struggle between authority and justice, between two unrealities, two violent forces, a struggle that is eternal, a renewal of Don Quixote's crusade against a world which refuses to

submit to the demands of the law-bringing spirit. For ever the book-keeper will do battle for the right, since if a penny is out he will go over every item again should the integrity of his books require it, and without being actually a good man himself, he will rise as the advocate of oppressed justice as soon as he has recognized and registered the existence of injustice and wrong; unyielding and wrathful he will rise to give battle, a lean knight with lance in rest who must charge again and again for the honour of the accurate book-keeping that ought to be able to account for everything on earth.

So Herr Esch's editorial labours were by no means so easy as one might have supposed. True, the material for his half-weekly sheet was delivered by a Cologne news and article agency, and all that the editor really needed to do was to extract from among the sensational reports the most sensational, to choose from the elegant serials and articles the most elegant, and there was nothing left for him to deal with personally but the local news, which moreover consisted chiefly of paragraphs "from a correspondent." But simple as this looked, and simple indeed as it really was so long as Esch confined himself to the book-keeping, which he had established on a new basis (not of course on the American, but on the more modest Italian model), all sorts of complications set in when the acting editor was called up and Herr Esch found himself compelled, partly by his natural and book-keeping parsimony, partly by the increasing difficulty of the general situation, to take the editorship of the paper into his own hands. Then the fight began! the fight for precise evidence of the world's doings, and against the false or falsified book-keeping entries which people tried to fob off on him, the fight against the authorities who were indignant that the *Kur-Trier Herald* should give public currency to abuses at the Front and behind the lines, to sailors' revolts and unrest in munition factories, more, who refused to listen even to the paper's proposals for genuinely fighting these evils, but on the contrary found it suspicious—although only an ill-wisher could have found it suspicious—that such reports should be confided to Herr Esch, and already were seriously considering whether they should interdict him the exercise of his editorial calling, on the ground that he was a foreign subject (a Luxemburger); he had been repeatedly warned, and his relations with the Censor's office in Trier were becoming more uncomfortable from week to week. Small wonder, then, that Herr Esch, himself at odds with the world, should begin to feel a brotherly sympathy for his oppressed and downtrodden fellow-creatures, and should become an obstructionist and a rebel. But he did not actually admit it to himself.

CHAPTER XI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (I)

Among the many intolerances and limitations which were so common in pre-war days, and of which we are now rightly ashamed, there must be reckoned our total lack of understanding when faced with phenomena that lay even a little way outside the confines of a seemingly rational world. And since we were then accustomed to regard only Western thought and culture as valid, and to depreciate all else as inferior, we were easily disposed to class as inferior and infra-European all phenomena that did not accord with simple reason. So when a phenomenon of that nature, such as the Salvation Army, made its appearance in the unimpressive garb of peace and fervent petition, it was met with endless ridicule. People demanded simplicity and heroism, something æsthetic in other words, believing as they did that such were the attributes of European man; for they were entangled in a misapprehension of Nietzsche's ideas, even although most of them had never heard his name, and the bogy which obsessed them was never laid until the world produced so many heroes that the sheer prevalence of heroism kept them from noticing it.

To-day, if I encounter a Salvation Army meeting in the street, I join it and am glad to put some money on the collection plate, and often I enter into conversation with the soldiers. Not that I have been converted by their somewhat primitive doctrine of salvation, but I feel that we who were once given over to prejudice are morally bound to repair our past errors wherever possible, even though these errors could be palliated as mere æsthetic decadence and had moreover the excuse of our extreme youth. Of course one's realization of these things came only gradually into consciousness, especially as during the war one seldom saw a Salvation Army soldier. I had indeed heard that they were developing a widely spread charitable organization, but I was almost surprised to meet a Salvation Army girl in one of the outlying streets in Schöneberg.

I suppose I must have looked somewhat lost and helpless, but my smile of friendly surprise encouraged her to accost me under a tactful pretext: she offered me a paper from the bundle under her arm. Perhaps she would have been disappointed if I had merely bought one, so I said: "I'm sorry, but I have no money." "That doesn't matter," she said, "come to us."

We traversed several typical suburban streets, passing derelict bits of ground, and I groused about the war. I believe she took me for a shirker, or even a deserter, who was forced by a kind of obsession to return

to that theme, for she openly did her best to divert me to other topics. But I stuck to the war, I cannot now tell why, and went on grousing.

Suddenly we found that we had missed our way. We had taken a narrow road skirting a block of factory buildings, and as we rounded a corner we discovered that the block went on and on. So we turned left into a little path bounded by a slack and forlorn wire fence—it was incomprehensible why the path should be fenced off, since there was nothing on either side but rubbish-heaps, broken crockery, battered water-cans, and piles of jugs and pots that had been carted out to this remote and inaccessible spot for no discoverable reason—and the path finally came to an end in an open field, not a real field, for there was nothing growing in it, but a field that had at any rate once been ploughed, either before the war or in the previous spring. That was indicated by the hard-baked furrows, which looked like frozen waves of clay. But obviously nothing had ever been sown there. In the distance a train puffed slowly across the countryside.

Behind us lay the factories and the great city of Berlin. So our case was not desperate, although the afternoon sun blazed pitilessly down upon us. We debated what we were to do. Go on walking to the next village?“We’re not fit to appear anywhere like this,” I said, and she obediently tried to shake the dust off her dark uniform. It was of the same coarse stuff as the uniform of the tram-conductors, shoddy stuff with threads of paper woven through it.

Then I noticed a wooden post rammed into the earth like a boundary mark. We made for it. We sat in turn in the narrow shadow of the post, speaking little, except of my thirst. And when it grew cooler we found our way back to the city.

CHAPTER XII

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (I)

Is this distorted life of ours still real? is this cancerous reality still alive? the melodramatic gesture of our mass movement towards death ends in a shrug of the shoulders,—men die and do not know why; without a hold on reality they fall into nothingness; yet they are surrounded and slain by a reality that is their own, since they comprehend its causality.

The unreal is the illogical. And this age seems to have a capacity for surpassing even the acme of illogicality, of anti-logicality: it is as if the monstrous reality of the war had blotted out the reality of the world. Fantasy has become logical reality, but reality evolves the most a-logical phantasmagoria. An age that is softer and more cowardly than any preceding age suffocates in waves of blood and poison-gas; nations of bank clerks and profiteers hurl themselves upon barbed wire; a well-organized humanitarianism avails to hinder nothing, but calls itself the Red Cross and prepares artificial limbs for the victims; towns starve and coin money out of their own hunger; spectacled school-teachers lead storm-troops; city dwellers live in caves; factory hands and other civilians crawl out on reconnoitring duty, and in the end, once they are back in safety, apply their artificial limbs once more to the making of profits. Amid a blurring of all forms, in a twilight of apathetic uncertainty brooding over a ghostly world, man like a lost child gropes his way by the help of a small frail thread of logic through a dream landscape that he calls reality and that is nothing but a nightmare to him.

The melodramatic revulsion which characterizes this age as insane, the melodramatic enthusiasm which calls it great, are both justified by the swollen incomprehensibility and illogicality of the events that apparently makeup its reality. Apparently! For insane or great are terms that can never be applied to an age, but only to an individual destiny. Our individual destinies, however, are as normal as they ever were. Our common destiny is the sum of our single lives, and each of these single lives is developing quite normally, in accordance, as it were, with its private logicality. We feel the totality to be insane, but for each single life we can easily discover logical guiding motives. Are we, then, insane because we have not gone mad?

The great question remains: how can an individual whose ideas have been genuinely directed towards other aims understand and accommodate himself to the implications and the reality of dying? One may answer that the mass of mankind have done nothing of the sort, and were merely forced towards death—an answer that is perhaps valid in these days of war-weariness; yet there undoubtedly was and still is, even to-day, a genuine enthusiasm for war and slaughter! One may answer that the average man, whose life moves between his table and his bed, has no ideas whatever, and therefore falls an easy prey to the ideology of hatred—which is in any case the most obviously intelligible of all, whether it concerns class hatred or national hatred—and that such narrow lives were bound to be subsumed in the service of any superpersonal idea, even a destructive one, provided that it could masquerade as socially valuable: yet even allowing for all that, this age was not devoid of other and higher super-personal values in which the individual, despite his narrow mediocrity, was already a participant. This age harboured somewhere a disinterested striving for

truth, a disinterested will towards art, and had after all a very definite social feeling; how could the men who created these values and shared in them "comprehend" the ideology of war, unresistingly accept and approve it? How could a man take a gun in his hand, how could he march into the trenches, either to die in them or to come out again and take up his work as usual, without going insane? How is such adaptability possible? How could the ideology of war find any kind of response in these men, how could they ever come even to understand such an ideology and its field of reality, not to speak of enthusiastically welcoming it, as was not at all impossible? Are they insane because they did not go insane?

Is it to be referred to a mere indifference to others' sufferings? to the indifference that lets a citizen sleep soundly next door to the prison yard in which someone is being hanged by the neck or guillotined? the indifference that needs only to be multiplied to produce public indifference to the fact that thousands of men are being impaled on barbed wire? Of course it is that same indifference, but it goes further than that; for here we have no longer merely two mutually exclusive fields of reality, that of the slayer on one side and of the slain on the other; we find them co-existing in one and the same individual, implying that one single field can combine the most heterogeneous elements, among which, however, the individual apparently moves with the utmost naturalness and assurance. The contradiction is not one between supporters and opponents of war, nor is it a horizontal split in the life of the individual, on the supposition that after four years' semi-starvation he "changes" into another type and stands in complete contrast to his former self: it is a split in the totality of life and experience, a split that goes much deeper than a mere opposition of individuals, a split that cuts right into the individual himself and into his integral reality.

We know too well that we are ourselves split and riven, and yet we cannot account for it; if we try to cast the responsibility for it on the age in which we live, the age is too much for our comprehension, and so we fall back on calling it insane or great. We ourselves think that we are normal, because, in spite of the split in our souls, our inner machinery seems to run on logical principles. But if there were a man in whom all the events of our time took significant shape, a man whose native logic accounted for the events of our age, then and then only would this age cease to be insane. Presumably that is why we long for a "leader," so that he may provide us with the motivation for events that in his absence we can characterize only as insane.

CHAPTER XIII

Looked at from the outside, Hanna Wendling's life could have been described as idle passivity within a perfectly ordered system, And, curiously enough, this description would have fitted it from the inside view also. Probably she herself would have agreed with it. It was a life that from her uprising in the morning to her lying down at night hung like a slack silken thread, slack and curling through lack of tension. In her particular case life, which has so many dimensions, lost one dimension after another, it barely sufficed even to fill the three dimensions of space: one could safely assert that Hanna Wendling's dreams were more plastic and more alive than her waking states. But however closely this opinion might have accorded with Hanna Wendling's, it leaves the heart of the matter untouched, for it illumines only the large-scale view of that young woman's existence, leaving almost unguessed-at the microscopic detail which is alone significant: there is no one who knows anything about the microscopic structure of his own soul, and unquestionably it is better that he should not. Behind the visible slackness of Hanna Wendling's life, then, there was a constant tension of its separate elements. If one could have snipped off a small but sufficient portion of that apparently slack thread, one would have discovered in it an extreme torsion, as if every molecule, so to speak, were spasmodically cramped. The external symptoms of this condition could best be covered by the popular term "nervousness," in so far as that implies the exhausting guerrilla warfare which during every second of its existence the ego has to wage against even the minutest encroachments of the empirical world with which its surface comes into contact. But although this term might account for much in Hanna Wendling, the peculiar tension in her life did not arise from nervous impatience with chance annoyances, such as dust on her patent shoes, or the pressure of the ring on her finger, or even the mere fact that a potato was not thoroughly cooked; it did not arise from that kind of thing, for all such disturbances were an infinitesimal rippling of the surface, like the shimmering of restless water in sunshine, and she would have regretted their absence, since they kept her somehow from being bored; no, it did not arise from that, but from the discrepancy between this infinitely modulated surface and the still, immovable profundity of her soul, which like the bottom of the sea was extended at a depth which no eye could ever penetrate: it was the discrepancy between the visible limited surface and an invisible limitlessness, that discrepancy which is the eternal setting for the most exciting drama ever played by the soul; it was the immeasurable gulf that stretches between the obverse and the reverse sides of darkness, a tension without equilibrium, a fluctuating tension, one might say, since on the one side there was life, but on the other that eternity which is the sea-bottom of the soul and of all life.

Hanna Wendling's life was one largely emptied of all substance, and perhaps for that reason purposeless. That it was the life of the insignificant spouse of an insignificant provincial lawyer makes very little difference. For the significance of any one human life is not particularly great. And even if the moral value of a slacker in a time of deadly war is not to be rated very highly, one must not forget that not one single person who voluntarily or under compulsion fulfilled the heroic duties of war-time would have been sorry to exchange his ethically valuable activities for the ethically valueless existence of a slacker. And perhaps—although only perhaps—the increasing paralysis that gripped Hanna Wendling as the war progressed in severity was nothing but the expression of a highly moral revulsion from the horror to which mankind saw itself committed. And perhaps that revulsion, that horror, had already grown so strong in her that Hanna Wendling herself did not dare to be aware of it.

CHAPTER XIV

On one of the following afternoons Huguenau again visited Herr Esch. "Well, Herr Esch, what do you think: the thing's as good as done!"

Esch was correcting proofs and raised his head: "What thing?"

Imbécile, thought Huguenau, but he said:

"Why, the sale of your newspaper."

"Depends on whether I agree to it."

Huguenau became suspicious:

"Now, look here, you can't let me down … or are you negotiating with someone else?" Then he noticed the child whom he had seen outside the printing-office in the morning:

"Is that your daughter?"

"No."

"Indeed … well, then, Herr Esch, if I'm to sell your paper for you, you must at least show me round the premises.…"

Esch waved his hand to indicate the room in which they were sitting; Huguenau tried to draw a smile out of him:

"So the little girl's included, is she?…"

"No," said Esch.

Huguenau pressed his point; he did not really know why he was so interested:

"But the printing-shed, that's included … you must at least show me round the printing-shed.…"

"I don't mind," said Esch, getting up and taking the child by the hand, "let's go into the printing-shed, then."

"And what's your name?" asked Huguenau.

The child said:

"Marguerite."

"Une petite française," said Huguenau.

"No," said Esch, "only her father's French."

"Interesting," said Huguenau, "and her mother?"

They were clambering down the ladder. Esch said in a low voice:

"Her mother's dead … her father was an electrician here in the paper factory, but now he's interned."

Huguenau shook his head:

"A sad business, very sad … and you've taken the child?"

Esch said:

"You're not inquisitive, are you?"

"I? no … but the child must surely live somewhere.…"

Esch said gruffly:

"She lives with her mother's sister … she only comes here sometimes for dinner … her people aren't well off."

Huguenau was content, now that he knew everything:

"Alors tu es une petite française, Marguerite?"

The child looked up at him, a glimmer of recollection played over her face, she let Esch go and took Huguenau's finger, but she made no reply.

"She can't speak a word of French … it's four years since her father was interned.…"

"How old is she, now?"

"Seven," said the child.

They went into the printing-shed.

“This is the printing-room,” said Esch, “the press and the setting-plant alone are worth several thousands.”

“A bit old-fashioned,” said Huguenau, who had never seen a printing-press before. The composing-room was to the right. The grey-painted type cases did not interest him, but the printing-press took his fancy. The tiled floor, strengthened here and there with great patches of concrete, was saturated and brown with oil all round the press. The machine stood there heavy and stolid, its cast-iron parts lacquered black, its steel bars shining, and its joints and supports bound with rings of brass. An old workman in a blue blouse was rubbing up the steel bars with a handful of waste, paying no heed to the intruders at all.

Esch said:

“Well, that’s all, let’s go … come, Marguerite.”

He went out without another word, leaving his visitor simply standing. Huguenau stared after the unmannerly lout, but was quite pleased; he could now examine things at his leisure. There was a pleasant effect of quietness and solidity. He took out his cigar-case, selected a cigar that was somewhat frayed, and offered it to the workman at the machine.

The printer looked at him incredulously, for tobacco was rare and a cigar at the best of times an acceptable gift. He wiped his hands on his blue garment, took the cigar, and because he was at a loss for adequate words of thanks he said:

“One doesn’t often see these.” “Yes,” replied Huguenau, “it’s a bad look-out for tobacco nowadays.” “It’s a bad look-out for everything,” asserted the printer. Huguenau pricked up his ears: “That’s just what your chief says.” “It’s what everybody says.” The answer was not quite what Huguenau would have liked. “Well, light up,” he ordered. The man bit off the end of the cigar with strong brownish teeth, somewhat as if he were cracking a nut, and lit up. His working blouse and his shirt were wide open, showing the white hair on his chest. Huguenau felt that he should get some return for the cigar; the man owed him something; so he encouraged him, saying: “A fine little machine.” “It’ll do,” was the laconic answer. Huguenau’s sympathies were with the machine, and he felt hurt by this grudging approval. And since he could think of no other way of breaking the silence, he asked: “What’s your name?” “Lindner.” Then silence settled definitely upon them, and Huguenau wondered if he shouldn’t go away,—but suddenly his finger was clasped again by a childish hand; Marguerite had run in noiselessly on her bare feet.

“Tiens,” he said, “tu lui as échappé.”

The child looked up incomprehendingly.

“Oh, of course, you don’t speak French … tut, tut, you’ll have to learn it.”

The child made a contemptuous gesture, the same gesture that Huguenau had already remarked as characteristic of Esch:

“The one upstairs can speak French too.…”

She said: the one upstairs.

Huguenau was pleased and said in a low tone:

“Don’t you like him?”

The child’s face grew sullen and her lower lip protruded, but then she noticed that Lindner was smoking.

“Herr Lindner’s smoking!”

Huguenau laughed and opened his cigar-case.

“Would you like one too?”

She pushed the case away and answered slowly:

“Give me some money.”

“What! It’s money you want, is it? What do you want money for?”

Lindner said:

“They begin young nowadays.”

Huguenau had drawn out a chair for himself; he sat down and took Marguerite between his knees:

“I need money myself, you know.”

“Give me some money.”

“I’ll give you some sweets.”

She was silent.

“What do you want money for?”

And although Huguenau knew that “money” was a very important word, and although he could not get it out of his head, yet he was suddenly incapable of seeing any meaning in it, and had to ask himself with an effort:

“What does anybody want money for?”

Marguerite had braced her arms on his knees and stood very rigid. Lindner growled:

“Oh, send her away,” and to Marguerite, “out you get, the printing-room is no place for children.”

Marguerite gave him an angry side-glance. She clutched Huguenau's finger again and began to pull him to the door.

"More haste, less speed," said Huguenau, rising up. "It's quietly that does it, eh, Herr Lindner?"

Lindner was polishing his machine again without a word to spare, and all at once Huguenau felt that there was some vague kinship between the child and the machine, almost as if they were sisters. And as if his assurance might comfort the machine he said quickly to the child before he reached the door:

"I'll give you twenty pfennigs."

When she thrust out her hand he was again aware of that curious doubt about the value of money, and cautiously, as if the affair were a mystery that concerned only the two of them and must not be overheard by anyone, not even the machine, he pulled the child close to him and whispered in her ear:

"What do you want the money for?"

The little one said:

"Give it to me."

But as Huguenau still delayed, she drew down reflective brows. Then she said: "I'll tell you," escaped from his arm and pulled him out through the door.

It had grown really cold by the time they were out in the courtyard. Huguenau would gladly have carried in his arms the little girl whose warmth he had so lately felt; it was not right of Esch to let a child run round barefooted at this time of the year. He was a little embarrassed, and polished his eyeglasses. Only when the child again thrust out her hand and said "Give it to me," did he remember about the twenty pfennigs. But he forgot to ask again what she wanted them for, opened his purse and extracted the two coins. Marguerite grabbed them and ran off, and Huguenau, left alone, could think of nothing else to do but to run his eye once more over the yard and the buildings. Then he too departed.

CHAPTER XV

As soon as Ludwig Gödicke of the Landwehr had gathered the most essential parts of his soul round his ego, he discontinued the painful struggle. It could be argued that all his life Gödicke had been a primitive kind of creature, and that a further struggle on his part would not have availed to increase the dimensions of his soul, since not even in the most dramatic moments of his life had there been many elements at the disposal of his ego. But that Gödicke was ever a primitive creature is a mere assertion that cannot be proved —and this alone invalidates the objection—nor could his new personality have been described as primitive; least of all, however, can one assume that the soul of a primitive and the world he sees are meagre and, so to speak, rough-hewn. One has only to remember how much more complicated is the structure of a primitive language than that of civilized peoples, in order to see that such an assumption is nonsensical. It is impossible to determine, therefore, whether Gödicke's choice among the elements of his soul was comprehensive or not, how many he admitted into his new personality, and how many he excluded; all that can be said is that Gödicke went about with the feeling of having lost something that formerly belonged to him, something that was not absolutely essential to his new life, but something nevertheless that he missed and yet dared not find again lest it should kill him.

And that there really was something missing was easily discernible from the economy of his utterances. He could walk, although with difficulty, could eat, although without appetite, and his very digestion, like everything connected with the crushed lower part of his body, gave him severe trouble. Perhaps his difficulty in speaking was in the same category, for it often seemed to him that the same oppression lay on his breast as on his bowels, that the iron rings constricting his belly were also bound round his chest and hindered him from speaking. Yet his incapacity to bring out even the shortest of words certainly sprang from that very economy with which he had composed his ego, and that provided for only the minimum of activity, so that any further demand upon it, let it be only the breath required for a single word, would have meant an irreplaceable loss.

So he hobbled about the garden on two sticks, his brown beard down on his chest, and his brown eyes above the deeply pitted hairy furrows on his cheeks gazing into vacancy; he wore the hospital overall or his soldier's cloak according as the Sister laid out one or the other for him, and he was certainly unaware that he was in a hospital or living in a town the name of which he did not know. Ludwig Gödicke the bricklayer had, so to speak, built a scaffolding for the house of his soul, and as he hobbled about on his sticks he felt himself to be merely a scaffolding with supports and stresses on all sides; meanwhile he could not decide, or rather, it was a sheer impossibility for him, to assemble the tiles and bricks for the house itself, and all that he did, or more precisely all that he thought—for he did nothing—was concerned with the mere scaffolding, with the elaboration of that scaffolding and all its ladders and gangways, a scaffolding that grew more perplexing daily and needed careful underpinning: a scaffolding that existed in itself and by

itself, though none the less its purpose was a real purpose, since invisibly in the centre of the scaffolding, and yet also in every single supporting beam, the ego of Ludwig Gödicke was precariously suspended and had to be preserved from dizziness.

Dr Flurschütz often thought of handing the man over to a mental hospital. But the Senior Medical Officer, Surgeon-Major Dr Kühlenbeck, was of the opinion that the patient's state of shock was merely the result of his experiences, and not organic, and so would pass off in the course of time. And since he was a quiet patient, easy to deal with, they agreed to keep him until he had completely recuperated from his bodily injuries.

CHAPTER XVI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (2)

There's
much that
can't be
said except
in verse,
despite the
sneers of
men who
stick to
prose;
the bonds
of verse are
less tight-
drawn than
those
of logic;
song is
fitter for a
curse
or a lament,
when day
like a dark
hearse
out-glooms
the night,
summoning
ghostly
woes,
and in a
hymn the
sad heart
overflows,
even at a
loud
Salvation
Army
Meeting,
nor smiles
when
drums and
tambourines
are beating.
—
Marie
walked
Berlin
streets like
a bold jade
and
haunted
drinking-
dens in her
poke-

bonnet;
her
girlhood
was in
flower, and
yet upon it
the ugly
uniform
like a blight
was laid;
her singing,
when she
sang before
the Lord,
was a thin,
empty
piping—yet
it soared.
Salvation
Army
Homes
were
Marie's
setting,
where
corridors
were grey
and reeked
of stoves
burning
foul coal,
and old
men sat in
droves
with
stinking
breath and
dirty feet a-
sweating,
where even
in summer
chills
played on
one's back
and yellow
soap stank
strong from
every
crack.
Here was
her
dwelling-
place,
within that
gate,
here in a
brown deal
alcove
stood her
bed
with a
brown
crucifix set
at its head,
and here
she knelt
and

thanked
God for her
fate,
waiting
with rapt
eyes for His
heavenly
grace,
and here
she slept,
and glory
filled the
place.
But she
must rise at
dawn and
wash her
face
with ice-
cold water
—hot water
is forbidden
in such a
house—
while yet
the sun is
hidden,
while the
expectant
air is still
and grey,
and
sometimes
heavy, as if
the sky
were
chidden,
or a
tarpaulin
blotted out
the day,
and that's
an hour
when one
may be
hag-ridden,
when hope
may fail;
for in the
lonely
dawn
how can
one think
that day
will bring a
friend?
or that the
precious
yesterday
that's gone
will be
affirmed
again
before day
end?
Marie has
no

misgivings;
she must fend
for all her charges;
she puts coffee on,
she sweeps and scours;
then, at the window
dreaming,
she sees the grace of God on all things gleaming.

CHAPTER XVII

It was very seldom that Hanna Wendling went into the town. She hated the way there, not only the dusty main road, which would have been quite understandable, but the path along the river as well. Yet the path took barely twenty-five minutes, and the main road only a quarter of an hour. She had always had a deep dislike for the road into the town, even at the time when she was still daily calling for Heinrich at the office. Later there had been the car, but only for a few months, for then the war broke out. To-day it was Dr Kessel who had taken her to the town with him in his buggy.

She made some purchases. Her new frock reached only as far as her ankles, and she felt as if people were staring at her feet. She had an intuitive feeling for fashions, and had always had it; she anticipated a coming fashion somewhat as certain people know that they will awaken at a certain time without having to look at the clock. Fashion journals for her had always been merely a belated corroboration. And the fact that people were staring at her feet now was also a sort of corroboration. There are of course lots of people who are able to waken to the minute, and many women with an intuitive feeling for the immanent logic of fashion, yet the man or woman who possesses a gift of this kind generally regards himself or herself as unique. So Hanna Wendling was feeling a little proud of herself now, and even if she had only a vague inkling that her pride was unjustified, yet a slight feeling of guilt assailed her when she saw the haggard women standing in queues before the bakers' shops. But when she reflected that any woman with the smallest sense of fashion could quite well shorten her skirt, for it could be done practically without expense —the housemaid had fixed hers up in an hour in spite of the new edging—then her pride did not seem unjustified after all, and as pride puts one in a good humour Hanna Wendling was not irritated by the greengrocer's dirty finger-nails, nor by the flies buzzing round his shop, and for the moment even the fact that her shoes were covered with dust scarcely troubled her. As she strolled through the streets, stopping now at one shop window, now at another, she had incontestably that virginal or nun-like appearance—it was often to be remarked during the war—that is to be seen in women who have been parted from their husbands for a long time and have remained faithful to them. Yet simply because Hanna Wendling felt a little proud at the moment, her face had opened out, and that indefinable soft veil which can fall over such women's faces like a stealthy premonition of approaching age was drawn aside by some invisible hand. Her face was like the first spring day after a long and severe winter.

Dr Kessel, who had to make several visits to patients in the town and thereafter to drive out to the hospital, had promised to set her down again at her door; she had arranged to meet him at the chemist's. When she reached it the buggy was already standing before the door, and Dr Kessel was chatting with Paulsen the chemist. Hanna Wendling had no need to be told what to think of Paulsen; indeed, she probably possessed the knowledge, extending far beyond his particular case, that all men who know that they are betrayed by their wives are wont to display a conspicuous and curiously empty gallantry towards other women; and yet she felt flattered when he rushed up to her with the words: "What a charming visit! Like a fresh spring day." For ruthlessly as Hanna Wendling was accustomed to avoid and cut people in general, to-day, because she felt free and unconstrained she was susceptible even to the empty compliments of the chemist,—it was an oscillation from one extreme to the other, a vacillation between complete reserve and complete lack of it, an immoderation of bearing such as often appears in cramped natures and is not in the least the immoderation of the Renaissance popes, but simply the instability and insignificance of an ordinary bourgeois who lacks a sense of values. At least it may be asserted that it was the lack of a sense of

values which now made Hanna Wendling, as she sat on the red plush-covered settle in the shop, shower dazzling and friendly glances on the chemist, and supply his lyrical phrases with a content in which she at once believed and did not believe. Indeed she felt quite cross with Dr Kessel, whose duty called him back to the hospital, when he was forced to suggest that they should leave, and when she sat beside him in the buggy the veil was once more drawn over her face.

She was monosyllabic on the way, monosyllabic at home. Once more she could not comprehend why she had refused so absolutely to return to her father's house in Frankfort for the duration of the war. The objection that food was easier to procure in the little town, that she could not leave the house standing empty, that the air here would be better for the boy; these were subterfuges which merely served to cloak the curious state of estrangement into which she had fallen, and to which she could not shut her eyes. She was shy of people, she had said so to Dr Kessel; "Shy of people," she repeated the words, and as she uttered them it was as though she were putting the responsibility for her shyness on Heinrich, just as she had blamed him when the brass pan in the kitchen had to be given up to be melted down for the war. Even with regard to the boy she was not immune from this mysterious feeling of estrangement. When she woke up in the night she found it difficult to realize that he was sleeping in the next room, and that he was her son. And when she struck a few chords on the piano, it was no longer her hands that did it, but unfeeling fingers which had become strange to her, and she knew that she was losing even her music. Hanna Wendling went to the bathroom to wash away her morning in the town. Then she contemplated herself carefully in the mirror, looking to see whether the face there was still hers. She found it, but she found it curiously veiled, and although she was in reality pleased by this, nevertheless she blamed Heinrich for it.

Moreover she often discovered now that his name did not come to her at once, and then even to herself she called him by the same name that she employed before the servants: Dr Wendling.

CHAPTER XVIII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (3)

I had lost sight of Marie, the Salvation Army girl, for some weeks. Berlin at that time resembled—well, what did it resemble? the days were hot; the asphalt soft, even gaping in places, for nothing was repaired; women were everywhere in charge as conductresses and the like; the trees in the streets wilted in the very spring-time, looking like children with old men's faces, and whenever the wind blew, dust and scraps of paper went whirling; Berlin had grown more countrified, more natural, as it were, and yet that made it all the more unnatural, as if it were an imitation of itself. In the house where I lodged there were two rooms occupied by Jewish refugees from the neighbourhood of Lodz, whose number and relationship to each other I was never able to make out; there were old men in Russian boots and ritual curls, and one that I happened to meet had buckled shoes and white stockings to the knee under his caftan, in the fashion of the eighteenth century; there were men who merely wore their coats rather long to suggest the caftan, and young men of remarkably mild appearance with woolly blond beards growing like false theatrical beards. Now and then a man in service grey uniform turned up, and even his uniform had a hint of the caftan about it. And sometimes there came a man of indefinite age, in ordinary town clothes, and his brown beard was shaven to a square fringe like Oom Paul Kruger's, and left unshorn only at the temples. He always had a stick with an old-fashioned crook handle, and a pince-nez on a black cord. I took him at once for a doctor. Of course there were women too, and children, matrons with false fronts, and young girls dressed, curiously enough, in the height of fashion.

In time I picked up a few words of the Yiddish German they spoke. But I never, of course, really understood it. Still, they seemed to think that inconceivable, for whenever I drew near they broke off the guttural gibberish that came so queerly from the mouths of such dignified ancients, and regarded me with sidelong shyness. In the evenings they mostly sat together in their unlighted rooms, and when in the mornings I came into the hall that was always crammed with garments of all kinds, in the middle of which the maid brushed shoes, I often used to find one of the older men standing at the window. He had his phylacteries bound on brow and wrists, he swayed his torso in time to the shoe-brush, and from time to time kissing the fringes of his cloak, recited at passionate speed with his faded lips faded, passionate prayers out of the window. Perhaps because the window faced east.

I was so fascinated by the Jews that I spent many hours daily quietly observing them. In the hall there hung two chromolithographs of rococo scenes, and I could not help wondering if the Jews could really see these pictures and many other things with the same eyes as ours, and read the same meaning into them. And obsessed by such preoccupations I completely forgot Marie of the Salvation Army, although in some way I felt that she was not unconnected with them.

CHAPTER XIX

Lieutenant Jaretzki's arm had been amputated. Above the elbow. When Kühlenbeck did a thing he did it thoroughly. What was left of Jaretzki sat in the hospital garden beside the shrubbery, regarding the blossoming apple-tree.

A round of inspection by the Town Commandant.

Jaretzki rose to his feet, felt for his diseased hand, felt nothing but emptiness. Then he stood to attention.

"Good-morning, Herr Lieutenant: well on the road to recovery, I see?"

"Yes, sir, but there's a good bit of me missing."

It almost seemed that Major von Pasenow felt himself responsible for Jaretzki's arm as he said:

"It's a terrible war … won't you sit down again, Herr Lieutenant?"

"Thank you, Herr Major."

The Major said:

"Where were you wounded?"

"I wasn't wounded, sir … gas."

The Major glanced at the stump of Jaretzki's arm:

"I don't understand … I thought gas suffocated a man.…"

"It can do this kind of thing too, sir."

The Major thought it over for a while. Then he said:

"An unchivalrous weapon."

"Quite so, sir."

Both of them remembered that Germany too was employing that unchivalrous weapon. But they did not mention it.

The Major said:

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight, sir."

"When the war began there wasn't any gas."

"No, sir, I believe not."

The sun illumined the long yellow wall of the hospital. A few white clouds hung in the blue sky. The gravel of the garden-path was firmly embedded in the black earth, and at the edge of the lawn crawled an earthworm. The apple-tree was like an enormous nosegay.

The Senior Medical Officer in his white overall came out of the house towards them.

The Major said:

"I hope you'll be all right soon."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Jaretzki.

CHAPTER XX

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (2)

The horror of this age is perhaps most palpable in the effect that its architecture has on one; I always come home exhausted and depressed after a walk through the streets. I do not even need to look at the house-fronts; they distress me without my raising my eyes to them. Sometimes I fly for consolation to the so highly commended "modern" buildings, but—and here I'm certainly at fault—the warehouse designed by Messel, who is none the less a great architect, strikes me only as a comic kind of Gothic, and it is a comic effect that irritates and depresses me. It depresses me so much that looking at buildings in the classical style scarcely suffices to restore me. And yet I admire the noble clarity of Schinkel's architecture.

I am convinced that no former age ever received its architectural expressions with dislike and repugnance; that has been reserved for ours. Right up to the development of classicism building was a natural function. It is possible that people never even noticed new buildings, much as one scarcely notices a newly planted tree, but if a man's eye did light upon them he saw that they were good and natural; that was how Goethe still saw the buildings of his time.

I am not an æsthete, and unquestionably never was one, although I may unwittingly have given that impression, and I am just as little addicted to the sentimentality that yearns for the past, transfiguring dead-and-gone epochs. No, behind all my repugnance and weariness there is a very positive conviction, the conviction that nothing is of more importance to any epoch than its style. There is no epoch in the history of all the human race that divulges its character except in its style, and above all in the style of its buildings; indeed no epoch deserves the name except in so far as it possesses a style.

It may be objected that my weariness and irritation are the results of my under-nourishment. It may be

pointed out that this age has its own very suggestive machine-and-cannon-and-concrete style, and that some generations must pass before it will be recognized. Well, every age has some stylistic claim; even the experimental ages in spite of their eclecticism had a kind of style. And I am even willing to admit that in our day technique has simply outrun creative effort, that we have not yet wrested from our new material its adequate forms of expression, and that all the disquieting lack of proportion arises from imperfectly mastered purpose. On the other hand, no one can deny that the new kind of building, whether because its material is recalcitrant or its builders incapable, has lost something, has even quite deliberately abandoned something that it could not help abandoning, the lack of which distinguishes it fundamentally from all previous styles: the characteristic use of ornament. Of course that renunciation can be praised as a virtue, on the assumption that we are the first to discover principles of structural economy that enable us to dispense with ornamental excrescences. But is not that term “structural economy” merely a modern catchword? Can it be maintained that the Gothic or any other style was not built with structural economy? To regard ornament as merely an excrescence is to mistake the inner logic of structure. Style in architecture is logic, a logic that governs the whole building from the plan of its foundation to its skyline, and within that logical system the ornament is only the last, the most differentiated expression on a small scale of the unified and unifying conception of the whole. Whether it is an inability to use ornament or a renunciation of it makes no difference; the result is that the architectural structures of this age are sharply distinguished from all previous styles.

But what does it avail to recognize this? Ornament can neither be fashioned by eclecticism nor artificially invented without falling into the comic absurdities of a Van der Velde. We are left with a profound disquiet and the knowledge that this style of building, which is no longer a style, is merely a symptom, a writing on the wall proclaiming a state of the soul which must be the non-soul of our non-age. Simply to look at it makes me tired. If I could, I would never leave my house again.

CHAPTER XXI

Apart from the fact that the food at the hotel was expensive and that Huguenau was unwilling to allow himself such a luxury until he had established himself in a new position, he had the distinct feeling that it might endanger his impending transactions if the Major saw too much of him. Further discussions would only spoil the effect he had made and gain nothing, and it seemed more advantageous that the Major should forget about him until they met again on Friday. So Huguenau took his meals in a humbler establishment, and appeared in the dining-hall again only on the Friday evening.

He had not reckoned in vain. There sat the Major, and he looked completely surprised when Huguenau approached him briskly and cordially and thanked him anew for his very friendly and flattering invitation. “Oh yes,” said the Major, who now remembered at last. “Oh yes. I’ll introduce you to the gentlemen.”

Huguenau once more thanked him and sat down modestly at another table. But when the Major had finished his supper and looked up, Huguenau smiled over at him and rose slightly, to show that he was at the Major’s disposal. Thereupon they went together into the little adjoining room, where was held the Friday gathering of the gentlemen of the town.

The gentlemen were present in full force, even the burgomaster himself was there. Huguenau was quite unable to catch all their names. As soon as he entered he had a feeling of being greeted with warm sympathy, and a premonition of complete success. This feeling did not deceive him. The majority of the company already knew of his presence in the town and the hotel; obviously he had become a theme for speculation, and they now evinced the warmest interest in his proposals, as he later informed Esch. The evening ended with unexpectedly positive results.

That was indeed nothing to be surprised at. The company had the impression that they were taking part in a secret conventicle, which was moreover at the same time a sort of summary court held on the rebel Esch. And if Huguenau got such an exceptionally gracious hearing from his listeners, that was not merely because of his intense desire to win it, nor because of his somnambulistic sureness, but also because he was not in the least a rebel, being rather a man fending for himself and his own interests, and speaking consequently a language which the others understood.

Huguenau could with ease have got the gentlemen to the point of subscribing the 20,000 marks demanded by Esch. But he did not do so. A secret fear admonished him that everything must remain tentative and no more than just plausible, because real security always hovers beyond or above the actual, and any too great solidity is dangerous and like an inexplicable oppression. This may appear meaningless, yet as every absurdity admits of some shred of reasonable explanation, so Huguenau’s explanation here was perfectly reasonable and led strangely enough to the same conclusion: it was that if he demanded or accepted too much money from these people, one of them might be struck with the idea of inquiring into

his credentials; but if he was standoffish and declined large subscriptions, retaining for his own legendary group the greater share of the invested capital, then they could not doubt that they beheld in him the genuine representative of the most highly capitalized industrial group in the Empire (Krupp's). And indeed no one doubted this, and in the end Huguenau himself finished by believing it. He declared that he was not in a position to offer his esteemed friends a greater share of the proposed 20,000 marks than a third—in other words 6600 marks in all; nevertheless he was prepared to enter into negotiations again with his group to find out whether instead of the two-thirds majority they would be content with a simple one of 51 per cent., and he would be glad also to accept suggestions in advance for later capital expansion; for the moment, however, the gentlemen must content themselves with the small sum mentioned.

The gentlemen were naturally disappointed, but there was no help for it. It was agreed that they should receive interim share certificates in return for their payments as soon as Huguenau had completed the purchase of the *Kur-Trier Herald*, and that after further sounding of the central group the consolidated undertaking would be established as a limited liability company or perhaps even as a syndicate. The prospective shareholders dreamed of future meetings of directors, and the evening closed with cheers for the allied armies and His Majesty the Kaiser.

CHAPTER XXII

When Huguenau awoke he put his hand under the pillow; there he was accustomed to keep his pocket-book for safety of nights. He had a pleasant sense of owning 20,000 marks, and although he knew that his pocket-book did not contain even the 6600 marks which he would receive from the local gentlemen only when the purchase of the *Herald* was completed, but that all that was left in it was a balance of 185 marks, yet he stuck to it that he had 20,000. He possessed 20,000 marks, and that settled the matter.

Against his usual custom he remained lying in bed for a little. If he had 20,000 marks it would be a piece of madness to give them to Esch, simply because the man asked so much for his measly rag. Every price allowed for give-and-take, and he would be able to beat Esch down a bit, Esch could depend on that. At 14,000 marks the paper would still be too dear, and that left a private profit of 6000. The matter had merely to be cleverly managed, so that nobody might know that Esch was not getting his full 20,000. One could put it down as capital reserve, or give out that the industrial group were content with a bare majority instead of the decisive two-thirds preponderance, or something like that. Something was certain to occur to him! and Huguenau leapt cheerfully out of bed.

When he appeared at the office of the *Herald* it was still quite early. And he fell upon the dumbfounded Herr Esch with the most violent reproaches for having let his paper fall so low. It was shocking, the things that he, Wilhelm Huguenau, who after all was not in the least responsible for Herr Esch, had had to listen to about the paper during those last two days. As a middleman, of course, that might have left him quite indifferent, but it broke one's heart, yes, it was heart-breaking to look on and see a good business wantonly being ruined; a newspaper lived by its reputation, and when its reputation was bankrupt, then it was itself bankrupt too. As things stood, it seemed that Herr Esch had managed things so that the *Kur-Trier Herald* was now a wretched unsaleable proposition. "You must see yourself, my dear Esch, that you should actually pay something to anyone who'll take over the paper, instead of demanding money from him."

Esch listened with a woebegone face; then he grimaced contemptuously. But Huguenau was not to be put out of countenance by that: "It's not a smiling matter, my dear friend, it's deadly serious, apparently far more serious than you think." The idea of making a profit was out of the question, and if one nevertheless did not give up all hope of that, it would be made possible only with the help of tremendous sacrifices, yes sacrifices, my dear Esch. If among his friends, as he hoped and believed, there were some self-sacrificing men prepared to take up this quite senseless, because idealistic scheme, then Herr Esch could simply call it luck, a piece of luck such as one did not encounter more than once in a lifetime; for thanks to singularly favourable circumstances, and his own very efficient abilities as a negotiator, he might eventually get together in spite of everything a round sum of 10,000 marks for Esch, and if Esch didn't snatch at that, then he was only sorry that he had thrown away his time on Esch's affairs, which didn't concern him in the least, no, not in the very least.

"Then leave them alone!" shouted Esch, striking the table with his fist.

"Pardon me, of course I can leave them alone … but I don't quite see why you should jump into a rage when a man doesn't accept straight off your fantastic ideas of what the paper's worth."

"I haven't made any fantastic demands.… The paper's a bargain at twenty thousand."

"Well, but don't you see that I actually accept your valuation? For you'll admit that the buyer will have to spend a further ten thousand at least in getting the paper on its legs again … and thirty thousand would really be exorbitant, don't you agree?"

Esch became thoughtful. Huguenau felt that he was on the right lines:

"Now, I see that you're going to be reasonable … I don't want to press you, of course.… You should just sleep on it.…"

Esch paced up and down the room. Then he said:

"I would like to talk it over with my wife."

"Do that by all means … only don't be too long in considering it … money talks, my dear Herr Esch, but it doesn't wait."

He got up:

"I'll call on you again to-morrow … and meanwhile please give my respects to your good lady."

CHAPTER XXIII

Dr Flurschütz and Lieutenant Jaretzki were walking from the hospital towards the town. The road was pitted with holes made by the motor-lorries, which ran on iron tyres now, for there was no rubber left.

A closed-down roofing-asphalt factory stretched thin black-zinc pipes up into the still air. Birds twittered in the woods.

Jaretzki's sleeve was fastened by a safety-pin to the pocket of his army tunic.

"Extraordinary," said Jaretzki, "since I've got rid of my left arm, the right one hangs down from my shoulder like a weight. I almost feel as if I would like it amputated too."

"You're a symmetrical fellow, it seems … engineers have a feeling for symmetry."

"Do you know, Flurschütz, sometimes I forget altogether that I ever was an engineer.… You won't understand that, for you've stuck to your profession."

"No, one can hardly say that … I was really more of a biologist than a doctor."

"I've sent off an application to the General Electric, there's a shortage of skilled workers everywhere now of course … but I simply can't picture myself sitting at a drawing-board again … what do you really think, how many have been killed altogether?"

"Can't say, five millions, ten millions … perhaps twenty before it comes to an end."

"I'm quite convinced that it can never come to an end … it will go on like this for all eternity."

Dr Flurschütz stopped:

"Look here, Jaretzki, can you understand how we can be walking about so peacefully here, how life itself can run on so quietly here, while only a few miles away they're blazing away merrily at each other?"

"Well, there's lots of things I don't understand … besides we've both done our bit out there.…"

Dr Flurschütz mechanically felt under the peak of his cap for his bullet scar:

"That wasn't what I meant … that was at the start, when one rushed into it because one felt ashamed to be left … but now one should by rights be going off one's head."

"It hasn't come to that yet … no, thanks, better to drink oneself blind.…"

"Well, you follow the prescription rather thoroughly."

The wind carried a smell of tar to them from the closed-down factory.

Thin and bent, with his fair pointed beard and his eyeglasses, Dr Flurschütz looked somewhat awkward in his uniform. They were silent for a while.

The road descended. The scattered bungalows that had sprung up outside the town gates during recent years presently drew together in a continuous line; they looked very peaceful. In all the front gardens wretched-looking vegetables were growing.

Jaretzki said:

"Not very pleasant to live all the year round in this smell of tar."

Flurschütz replied:

"I was in Roumania and Poland. And do you know … everywhere the houses had just the same peaceful look … with the same trade signs as here, master-builder, locksmith, and so forth … in a dug-out near Armentières I once saw a shop sign, it was one of the roof props, 'Tailleur pour Dames' … perhaps it's silly, but the complete madness of the whole war really only dawned on me then for the first time."

Jaretzki said:

"With my one arm I suppose I could get myself taken on for some job in the army as an engineer."

"You would like that better than the General Electric?"

"No, I'm past liking anything better … perhaps I'll just report for service again with my remaining arm … for throwing hand-grenades one arm would be enough … lend me a hand to get this cigarette lit."

"What have you been drinking to-day, Jaretzki?"

"Me? nothing worth speaking of, I've kept sober for the sake of the wine I'm presently going to introduce you to."

“Well, how about the General Electric?”

Jaretzki laughed:

“To be quite honest, merely a sentimental attempt to get back into civilian life, with a career to look forward to, no more of this drifting about, perhaps get married … but you believe as little in that as I do.”

“Why on earth shouldn’t I believe in it?”

Jaretzki punctuated his reply with his cigarette:

“ Because … the … war … can … never … come … to … an …
end … how often must I tell you that?”

“That too would be a solution,” said Flurschütz.

“It is the only solution.”

They had reached the town gate.… Jaretzki put up his foot on the curbstone, drew his handkerchief out of his pocket, and, his cigarette aslant in his mouth, flicked the dust of the road from his shoes. Then he stroked his dark moustache smooth, and passing through the cool arch of the gate they stepped into the still and narrow street.

CHAPTER XXIV

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (3)

The primacy of architectural style among the things that characterize an epoch is a very curious phenomenon. But, in general, so is the uniquely privileged position that plastic art has maintained in history. It is after all only a very small excerpt from the totality of human activities with which an age is filled, and certainly not even a particularly spiritual excerpt, and yet in power of characterization it surpasses every other province of the spirit, surpasses poetry, surpasses even science, surpasses even religion. The thing that endures through thousands of years is the work of plastic art; it remains the exponent of the age and its style.

This cannot be due merely to the durability of the material employed; the bulk of the printed paper from the last few centuries has survived, and yet any Gothic statue is more “medieval” than the whole of medieval literature. No, that would be a very inadequate explanation,—if there should be one, it must be found in the intrinsic nature of the concept of style itself.

For certainly style is not a thing confined to architectural and plastic art merely; style is something which uniformly permeates all the living expressions of an epoch. It would be against all reason to regard the artist as an exception among mankind, as a man leading a sort of peculiar existence within the style which he himself produces, while the others remain excluded.

No, if there is such a thing as style, then all human manifestations are penetrated by it, so that the style of a period is as indubitably present in its thought as in every other human activity of the period. And only by starting from this fact, which must be so, because it is impossible that it should be otherwise, can we find an explanation for the remarkable fact that precisely those activities which manifest themselves in spatial terms have become of such extraordinary and in the real sense of the word visible significance.

Perhaps it would be idle to consider this too curiously if behind it there did not stand the problem which alone justifies all philosophizing: our dread of nothingness, our dread of Time, which conducts us to death. And perhaps all the disquietude which bad architecture evokes, causing me to hide in my house, is nothing else than that dread. For whatever a man may do, he does it in order to annihilate Time, in order to revoke it, and that revocation is called Space. Even music, which exists only in time and fills time, transmutes time into space, and it is in the utmost degree probable that all thought takes place in a spatial world, that the process of thought represents a combination of indescribably complicated many-dimensional logically extended spaces. But if that be so, then it also becomes clear why all those activities which are immediately related to space achieve a significance and an obviousness that can never be achieved by any other human activity. And in this also can be seen the peculiar symptomatic significance of ornament. For ornament, detached from all purposive activity, although produced by it, becomes the abstract expression, the “formula” of the whole complex of spatial thought, becomes the formula of style itself, and with that the formula of the entire epoch and its life.

And in this, it seems to me, lies the significance, a significance that I might almost call magical, of the fact that an epoch which is completely under the dominion of death and hell must live in a style that can no longer give birth to ornament.

CHAPTER XXV

Had it not been for the prospect of building the new house they were to live in, Hanna Wendling might

perhaps never have become engaged to the young provincial advocate. But in 1910 all young girls in the better-class bourgeois families read *The Studio, Interior Decoration, German Art and Decoration*, and owned a work called *English Period Furniture*, and their erotic preconceptions of marriage were in the most intimate manner bound up with problems of architectonics. The Wendlings' house, or "Rose Cottage," for such the quaint lettering on its gable designated it, conformed in a modest degree to these ideals; it had a deep roof with low eaves; majolica cherubs at either side of the front door displayed symbols of love and fertility; there was an English hall with a rough tiled stove, and a chimneypiece with brass knick-knacks standing on it. It had given her a great deal of labour and pleasure to find for every piece of furniture its appropriate position, so that a general architectonical equilibrium might be inaugurated; and when all was finished Hanna Wendling had the feeling that she and she alone was aware of the perfection of that equilibrium, even though Heinrich too had a share in the knowledge, even though a great part of their married happiness consisted in this mutual awareness of the secret harmony and counterpoint exemplified in the arrangement of the furniture and pictures.

Now the furniture had not been moved since that time, on the contrary, strict care had been taken not to alter the original arrangement by an inch; and yet it had become different: what had happened? can equilibrium suffer depreciation, can harmony become threadbare? In the beginning she was not conscious that apathy was at the back of this,—her positive emotion simply relapsed into neutrality, and only when it transformed itself into a negative condition did it become perceptible: it was not that the house or the arrangement of the furniture had now become repellent to her, for that might have been got over at a pinch by changing the disposition of the furniture; no, it was something that went deeper; the curse of the fortuitous and the accidental had spread itself over things and the relations between things, and one could not think out any arrangement that would not be just as fortuitous and arbitrary as the existing one. In all this there lay doubtless a certain confusion, a certain darkness, indeed almost a danger, particularly as there seemed no reason why this insecurity in architectonics should stop at other matters of sentiment, even for instance at questions of fashion: this thought was particularly alarming, and although Hanna Wendling knew very well that there were far more important and difficult problems, yet perhaps nothing was more alarming to her than the thought that even the fashion journals might lose their attraction for her, and that one day she might regard without delight, without interest, without comprehension, the English journal *Vogue* itself, which she had missed so sorely during these four years of the war.

When she caught herself indulging in those thoughts she told herself that they were fantastic, although in fact they were far more essentially sober than fantastic, filled with a kind of disenchantment which was only fantastic in so far as no intoxication had preceded it, rather indeed a subsequent and additional disenchantment supervening on a state that was already sober and almost normal, so that in a sense it became still more normal and landed in negation. Such evaluations must always of course be relative in a certain degree; the border-line between sobriety and intoxication cannot always be established, and whether for instance the Russian love for humanity should be regarded as an intoxication, or whether it is to be taken as a standard for normal social relations, indeed whether the whole panorama of existence is to be regarded as drunk or sober; all these questions in the final resort are not to be resolved. Nevertheless it is not impossible that sobriety implies an ultimate state of entropy or an absolute zero, an absolute zero towards which all movement perpetually and of necessity strives. And there were many indications that Hanna Wendling was moving in this direction, and in essentials perhaps she was simply as usual anticipating a coming fashion; for the entropy of man implies his absolute isolation, and that which hitherto he has called harmony or equilibrium was perhaps only an image, an image of the social structure, which he made for himself, and could not help making, so long as he remained a part of it. But the more lonely he becomes, the more disintegrated and isolated will things seem to him, the more indifferent he must become to the connections between things, and finally he will scarcely be able any longer to see those connections. So Hanna Wendling walked through the house, walked through her garden, walked over paths which were laid with crazy-paving in the English style, and she no longer saw the pattern, no longer saw the windings of the white paths, and painful as this might well have been, it was scarcely even painful any more, for it was necessary.

CHAPTER XXVI

Huguenau now turned up daily in Fischerstrasse to see Herr Esch. Often, employing a well-tried business ruse, he did not even mention the transaction that had brought him, but waited for his opponent's move, talking meanwhile about the weather, the crops, and the latest victories. When he saw that Esch did not want to hear anything about the victories, he dropped the victories and confined himself to the weather.

Sometimes he found Marguerite in the courtyard. The child was confiding, clung to his finger, and

begged him to take her into the printing-room again. Huguenau said:

"Aha! you're after another twenty pfennigs, are you? But Uncle Huguenau isn't rich enough yet, everything takes its time."

Nevertheless he gave her ten pfennigs for her money-box:

"Well, what will we do when we're both rich …?"

The child stared at the ground and did not reply. At last she said hesitatingly:

"Go away."

For some reason Huguenau felt pleased by this:

"So that's what you need the money for … well, when we're rich we can both go away together.… I'll take you with me."

"Yes, do," said Marguerite.

Whenever he went up to see Esch she generally stole up after him, sat down on the floor and listened. Or if she did not do this she would at least put her head in at the door and laugh. Huguenau would say then, because it was an unfailing topic for conversation:

"I'm fond of children."

Esch seemed to like that; he smiled complacently:

"A little ruffian … she would do one in if it came up her back."

Haïssez les Prussiens, Huguenau could not help thinking, although Esch was not a Prussian at all, but a Luxemburger. Esch went on:

"I've often thought of adopting the little rascal … we haven't any children of our own."

Huguenau was surprised:

"Another man's child.…"

Esch said:

"Another's or your own … it's much the same … a pretty thin life without one."

Huguenau laughed:

"Well, yes, you can't be too sure even of your own children."

Esch said:

"Her father's interned.… I've talked over the question of adopting her with my wife … after all she's practically an orphan."

Huguenau said reflectively:

"Hm, but then you would have to provide for her."

"Of course," said Esch.

"If you had any spare cash, or could get hold of some, by selling out, for instance, you could take out a life insurance policy for your family.… I have connections with several insurance companies."

"Indeed," said Esch.

"I'm still a single man, thank God, in difficult times like these that's an immense advantage … but if I should ever set up house, I'll safeguard my family by a settlement of capital or something of the kind … well, you're in the enviable position of being able to do that.…"

Huguenau went away.

Marguerite was waiting for him in the courtyard.

"Would you like to stay here always?"

"Where?" asked the child.

"Why, here, with Uncle Esch."

The child gazed at him with hostility.

Huguenau winked at her and wagged his head:

"Rather not, what?"

Marguerite laughed too.

"Well, you would rather not …?"

"No, I don't want to."

"And you don't care much for him either … he's very strict with you, eh?" and Huguenau brought his arm down as if smacking someone.

Marguerite made a contemptuous grimace:

"No.…"

"And the other one … Aunt Esch …?"

The child shrugged her shoulders.

Huguenau was satisfied:

"Well, you won't need to stay here … we'll run away, the two of us, to Belgium … come, let's go and see Herr Lindner in the printing-room."

Together they went up to the printing-press and watched Herr Lindner as he fed it with sheets of paper.

CHAPTER XXVII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (4)

The feeling that the Jews had been taking stock of me proved to be justified. For two days I had felt rather out of sorts, had scarcely touched my breakfast and gone out for only half-an-hour. On the evening of the second day there came a knock at the door of my room, and to my surprise the little man entered whom I had always taken to be a doctor. And indeed he actually revealed himself as one.

"You must be ill," he said.

"No," I said, "and if I am it's nobody's business."

"It won't cost you anything, I haven't come for the sake of the money," he said timidly, "one must help."

"Thanks," I said, "I'm quite well."

He stood before me, holding his walking-stick tightly pressed to his bosom.

"Fever?" he asked imploringly.

"No, I'm quite well, I'm just going out."

I got up and we left the room together.

In the hall one of the young Jews was standing, one of those with the downy stage beards.

The doctor now introduced itself:

"My name is Dr Litwak."

"Bertrand Müller, doctor of philosophy," I gave him my hand; the young Jew also offered me his hand. It was dry and cool, and as smooth as his face.

They attached themselves to me as though it were the most natural thing in the world. I wasn't going anywhere in particular, but I walked very fast. The two of them, one on my right and the other on my left, kept step with me and conversed with each other in Yiddish. I became seriously annoyed:

"I don't understand a word you're saying."

They laughed:

"He says he doesn't understand a word."

After a while:

"Really, you don't know any Yiddish?"

"No."

We reached the end of Reichenbergerstrasse, and I set my course for Rixdorf.

Well, and then we encountered Marie.

She was leaning against a lamp-post. It was already quite dark, but the gas was being used sparingly. All the same I recognized her at once.

Moreover the windows of the restaurant opposite gave a little light.

Marie recognized me too; she smiled to me. Then she asked:

"Are these friends of yours?"

"Neighbours," I replied.

I suggested a visit to the restaurant, for Marie seemed to be exhausted and in need of something to eat. But the two Jews refused to enter the restaurant. Perhaps they were afraid that they might be forced to eat pork, perhaps they were afraid of being jeered at or something or other. In any case one could have made it a pretext for getting rid of them.

But an extraordinary thing happened: Marie ranged herself on the side of the Jews, said that she was not in the least hungry, and as though it were an unavoidable arrangement, she went on in front with the young Jew, while I followed with Dr Litwak.

"Who is he?" I asked the doctor, pointing at the young Jew, the tails of whose grey coat swung in front of me.

"He's called Nuchem Sussin," said Dr Litwak.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Dr Kühlenbeck and Dr Kessel had been in the operating-theatre. Generally Kühlenbeck spared Dr Kessel as much as possible, for Dr Kessel, although at the disposal of the hospital, was overworked attending to his panel patients; just now, however, the new offensive had brought in fresh material for treatment, and Kühlenbeck had no choice. It was fortunate that only lighter cases had been sent. Or at least what were called lighter cases.

And because the two men were genuine doctors, they sat talking over their cases later in Kühlenbeck's

room. Flurschütz too had come in.

"A pity that you weren't there to-day, Flurschütz, you would have enjoyed it," said Kühlenbeck. "It's astonishing how much you learn … if we hadn't operated, the man would have been a cripple for the rest of his life …" he laughed, "but now he'll be able to go out and be shot at again in six weeks' time."

Kessel said:

"I only wish my poor panel patients were as well looked after as the men here."

Kühlenbeck said:

"Do you know the story of the convict who swallowed a fish-bone and had to be operated on so that they might be able to hang him next morning? That's our job at the moment."

Flurschütz said:

"If the doctors in all the combatant countries went on strike, the war would soon be over."

"Well, Flurschütz, you can make a beginning."

Dr Kessel said:

"I feel jolly well inclined to send the ribbon back … you should feel ashamed of yourself, Kühlenbeck, playing an old colleague such a dirty trick."

"What could I do? I had to give you your medicine … the civilians are all wearing the black-and-white now."

"Yes, and you're just running round palming it off on them.… You've been down on the list too for a long time now, Flurschütz."

Flurschütz said:

"At bottom it just comes down to this, that we all sit about here discussing cases that are more or less interesting, without thinking of anything else … we haven't time as a matter of fact to think of anything else … and it's the same everywhere. You get swallowed up, swallowed up by what you're doing … simply swallowed up."

Dr Kessel said:

"Damn it all, I'm fifty-six, what is there left for me to think about? … I'm glad when I get into bed at night."

Kühlenbeck said:

"Would you care for a drink at the regiment's expense …? We'll be getting another twenty men or so in by two o'clock … will you stay to receive them?"

He had got up and walked over to the medicine cabinet beside the window, from which he now took a bottle of cognac and three glasses. As he stood in profile against the window reaching up his hand to the shelf in the cabinet, his beard was outlined against the light and he looked gigantic.

Flurschütz said:

"We're all being pumped dry by the profession we're stuck in … and even soldiering and patriotism are nothing more than professions … we're simply past understanding what is happening in any province but our own."

"Thank God for that!" said Dr Kühlenbeck, "doctors don't need to be philosophers."

Sister Mathilde entered. She smelt of scented soap. Or at least one felt that she must smell of it. Her narrow face with the long nose contrasted with her housemaid's red hands.

"Dr Kühlenbeck, the station people have rung up to say that the transport train has arrived."

"Good, one more cigarette before we go … you're coming too, Sister?"

"Sister Carla and Sister Emmy have gone to the station already."

"Excellent … well, shall we be going, Flurschütz?"

"Straining at the leash," remarked Dr Kessel, but without real gusto.

Sister Mathilde had remained standing at the door. She liked to dawdle in the doctors' room. And as they all went out, Flurschütz's eye caught the gleam of her white throat, noted the freckles where her hair began, and he felt a little touched.

" 'Day, Sister," said the Chief.

"Good-day, Sister," said Flurschütz too.

"Gott mit uns," said Dr Kessel.

CHAPTER XXIX

Trees and houses appeared before the eyes of the bricklayer Gödicke, the weather changed, sometimes it was day and sometimes night, people moved about and he heard them speaking. Food was brought and set before him on objects, mostly round, made of tin or earthenware. He knew all this, but the way that led to a knowledge of these things, or by which they reached him, was a laborious one: the bricklayer Gödicke had

now to work harder than he had ever done in his hard-working life. For it was by no means a simple and self-evident action to lift a spoon to one's mouth when one was not clear in one's mind who it was that was being fed, and the frightful strain of making this clear turned it into a torment of despairing labour and impossible duty; for nobody, least of all Gödicke himself, could have provided a theory to explain the structural elements that composed his personality. For of course it would have been erroneous to assert that the man Gödicke was made up of several Gödickes, including for instance a boy Ludwig Gödicke who had played in the street with his friends and made tunnels in the ash-heaps and sandpits, a boy who was called in every day to dinner by his mother and made to carry his father's dinner afterwards to the building where he was working, since he too had been a bricklayer; to assert that that boy Ludwig Gödicke represented a constituent part of the man's present self would have been just as erroneous as to recognize another constituent part of it, say, in the apprentice Gödicke who had envied the Hamburg carpenters so intensely on account of their broad-brimmed hats and the mother-of-pearl buttons on their waistcoats that he had not rested until, to spite them all, he had seduced the bride of the carpenter Gürzner among the bushes by the riverside, although he was merely a bricklayer's apprentice; and it would be erroneous again to assert that yet another part was the man who during a strike had put the concrete-mixing machine out of action by unscrewing the cylinders, and in spite of that had left the union when he married the servant-girl Anna Lamprecht, and that simply because she cried so much on account of the baby that was coming: no, such a longitudinal splitting as this, such a quasi-historical section, can never give the constituent elements of a personality, for it cannot go beyond the biographical. The difficulties with which the man Gödicke had to contend, then, were certainly not caused by the fact that he felt this whole series of persons living within him, but rather sprang from the sudden interruption of the series at a certain point, from the fact that there was no connection between the earlier biography and himself, though he himself should obviously have been the last link in the chain, and that being cast adrift in this way from something which he could hardly any longer describe as his life, he had lost his own identity. He saw these figures as through smoked glass, and although when he lifted the spoon to his mouth he would have liked well enough to be feeding the man who had lain with Gürzner's fiancée under the bushes—indeed, that would have given him great pleasure—nevertheless he simply could not bridge the gap, he remained as it were on the farther bank and could not lay hold of the man on the other side. And yet perhaps in spite of all that he might have bridged the gap if he could only have known for certain who it really was that remembered Gürzner's girl: for the eyes that had looked at the bushes by the riverside then were not the same eyes that gazed at the trees along the avenue now, nor again were these quite the same as those which looked round the room. And beyond doubt there was one Gödicke who could not bear that that other man should be fed, and who refused to feed him, that man who was even now still prepared to sleep with Gürzner's girl. And the Gödicke who was enduring these pains in his abdomen might be with equal probability either the one who issued the refusal, or the one against whom it was directed, but he might just as well be a quite different Gödicke altogether. It was a highly complicated problem, and the bricklayer Gödicke could not see his way through it at all. It had probably arisen through his reluctance to resume all the scattered fragments of his soul in returning to consciousness, but perhaps it might also have been the cause why he was not in a condition to do so. True, if he could have peered within himself now, one could not exclude the possibility that in each fragment of his ego which he had admitted he might have recognized a separate Gödicke, somewhat as though each of those fragments were an independent nucleus. For it may be that the same thing happens with the soul as with a piece of protoplasm, in which by dissection one can produce a multiplication of nuclei and therewith new regions of autonomous, intact and separate life. However that may be, and however it may have come about, in Gödicke's soul there existed several autonomous and integral separate existences, to each of which one might have ventured to give the title of Gödicke, and it was a laborious and almost impossible task to subsume them all in one personality.

This task the bricklayer Gödicke had to accomplish entirely by himself; there was no one who could help him.

CHAPTER XXX

When after a politic interval of two days Huguenau once more appeared in Esch's office, he found a broad-hipped person of uncertain age, devoid equally of sex and charm, sitting in the basket-chair beside Esch's desk. It was Frau Esch, and Huguenau knew that now the game was his. He had only to make a favourable impression on her:

"Oh, your good lady is going to give us the benefit of her assistance in these difficult negotiations.…"

Frau Esch drew back a little:

"I know nothing about business matters, that's my husband's affair."

“Ah, yes, your husband, he’s a real business man *comme il faut*; he’s a tough nut to crack, I can tell you, and lots of people will break their teeth on him yet.”

Frau Esch smiled faintly, and Huguenau felt encouraged to go on:

“A splendid idea of his to take advantage of the market and get rid of the paper, which brings him only worry and annoyance, you might say, and business going from bad to worse.”

Frau Esch said politely:

“Yes, my husband has a great deal of worry with the paper.”

“I’m not going to give it up, all the same,” said Esch.

“Come, come, Herr Esch, if your health is of no account to yourself, I’m sure that your good lady will have a word or two to say about that … besides,” Huguenau considered, “… if you don’t want to sever your connection entirely with the paper, you can make your further collaboration a condition of the deal, the group I represent will only be too glad if I secure them such valuable assistance.”

Well, that might be considered, Esch thought, but under 18,000 marks it couldn’t be done, he and his wife had just come to that decision.

Well, it was a hopeful sign that Herr Esch had already somewhat qualified the fancy price he had asked; still, if he wanted to retain his connection with the business, he must surely make some allowance for that too.

To what extent, asked Herr Esch.

Huguenau felt that something concrete was demanded:

“The simplest way, really, would be to draw up a trial contract and go over the different points by the way.”

“All right, I don’t mind,” said Esch, taking out a sheet of paper, “dictate.”

Huguenau seated himself in the appropriate posture:

“Well, right then; Heading: Memorandum of Contract.”

After much desultory discussion, which took up the whole forenoon, the following contract resulted:

> 1. *Herr Wilhelm Huguenau, as representative and executor of a group of combined interests, hereby enters into partnership with the private company owning the* Kur-Trier Herald *on the following terms, the property of the firm to be allocated as follows:*
>
> *10 per cent. to remain in the possession of Herr August Esch.*
>
> *60 per cent. to be held by the “Industrial Group” represented by Herr Huguenau.*
>
> *30 per cent. to be held by the group of local interests also represented by Herr Huguenau.*

Esch’s original claim to half-ownership was turned down by Huguenau: “That would be against your own interests, my dear Esch, the bigger your share, the less you’ll realize in cash … you see, I’m keeping an eye on your interests.”

> 2. *The firm’s assets consist of the publishing and other rights, together with the office furnishings and complete printing plant. Interim share certificates shall be issued, covering the new distribution of share capital.*

The Statue of Liberty and the view of Badenweiler were claimed by Herr Esch as his private property and not included among the firm’s assets. “Certainly,” said Huguenau magnanimously.

> 3. *The net profits shall be distributed among the shareholders in proportion to the number of share certificates held, except for any sum that may be carried to the reserve fund. The losses shall be borne in the same proportion.*

The clause regarding the losses was inserted in the contract at Herr Esch’s request, as Herr Huguenau had not entertained the possibility of losses. The reserve fund too was Esch’s suggestion.

> 4. *As representative and executor of the new group of shareholders Herr Huguenau brings into the firm capital amounting to 20,000 marks (say twenty thousand marks). One-third of this amount to be paid up immediately; the two further instalments of one-third may be paid, if the shareholders desire, within the next six months or twelve months respectively. On deferred payments the firm shall charge interest at the rate of 4 per cent. per half-year. The share certificates shall be allotted in proportion to the money paid in.*

As the share certificates were to be issued immediately on payment, and the high rate of 4 per cent. was a grave deterrent, Huguenau was not greatly afraid of the local subscribers taking advantage of the deferred payment; but even if they did, some means or other would easily enough be found of tiding over the emergency. Nor was he worried by the question of how he himself was to get together the deferred payments of his legendary industrial group—the first instalment did not fall due for another half-year, at the beginning of 1919, that was to say, and it was a long time until then, and lots of things might happen;

the war conditions created a great deal of confusion, perhaps peace might have come by then, perhaps the paper itself might have brought in the sum required, in which case it would of course be necessary to conceal those gains by the creation of imaginary losses and thus wipe them off, perhaps Esch would be dead by that time—one would find some way of getting over the difficulty and coming out on top.

5. *The payments made by Herr Wilhelm Huguenau, in all 20,000 marks, shall be allocated to two accounts: viz. 13,400 marks to the account of the Huguenau "Industrial Group," and 6600 mark to the account of the local subscribers.*

But now came the most difficult point in the negotiations. For Esch insisted on his 18,000 marks, while Huguenau maintained that first of all 10 per cent., that was 2000 marks, had to be deducted on account of the shares retained by Esch, but that in addition the rebate had to be doubled in consideration of the increased capital put into the business, thus making in all 4000 marks; so that Esch, even accepting his own valuation, would have only 14,000 coming to him; but even that was still far too much; he, Huguenau, as a middleman, had to be unbiassed, and he would never be able to get such a price as that out of his group, delighted as he would be to do so for Esch and his charming wife's sake; no, that would be simply impossible, for he must have a serious proposal to lay before his clients, and he had no wish to be laughed out of court; in this matter he was not in the least a partisan, but quite objective, and as an impartial judge he could offer 10,000 marks for the remaining 90 per cent. of the business, but not a penny more.

No, Esch shouted, he wanted his eighteen thousand.

"How can anyone be so hard of hearing?" Huguenau turned to Frau Esch, "I've just proved to him that according to his own valuation all that he can ask is fourteen thousand."

Frau Esch sighed.

Finally they agreed on 12,000 marks and on the following clause:

6. *As former sole proprietor Herr August Esch shall receive:*

(a) *A final quittance of 12,000 marks, of which a third, that is to say, 4000 mark, shall be paid immediately to Herr Esch by the company, and the two further instalments of 4000 each on 1st January and 1st July 1919 respectively. Interest at the rate of 4 per cent. will be charged on the two outstanding instalments*;

(b) *A contract engaging him for a period of two years as assistant editor and head book-keeper with a monthly salary of 125 marks.*

Perhaps Esch might not still have given in, even though Huguenau adroitly diverted the dispute to the subordinate concession of the interest payable to Esch, intending only after a hotly contested sham fight to allow the 4 per cent. to be wrung from him; no, Esch might not even then have given in, had not the prospect of such complicated book-keeping so dazzled and enchanted him that it never entered his head that the outstanding instalments—and he had not the slightest idea that their payment presupposed nothing less than a miracle—might never be settled, or that the difference between the 12,000 marks and the 20,000 marks might flow, in spite of all those book-keeping prospects which so allured him, into Huguenau's fraudulently open pockets. To tell the truth, Huguenau thought just as little of such sordid matters, so unconscious was he that once the payments were made by the local subscribers the *Kur-Trier Herald* became *via facti* a pure gift to him; he fought with all sincerity for the interests of his hypothetical clients and said at last in an exhausted tone: "Ouf, well, as far as I'm concerned, let us make it 12,000 marks and 4 per cent. as you say, to settle the matter for good. I'll take the responsibility on my own shoulders … but I must get something out of it too.…"

7. *Reciprocal rights and duties:*

(a) *Herr Huguenau shall act as publisher and editor. The commercial and financial conduct of the enterprise rests exclusively in his hands. He has furthermore the right to accept and reject articles for the paper as he thinks fit. In return for these services the firm guarantees him a minimum salary of 175 M. per month, that is to say, 2100 M. yearly.*

(b) *During the period covered by his contract Herr Esch shall for his part keep the books of the firm and act as assistant editor.*

Esch had to agree to the limitation of his editorial powers out of consideration for the industrial group; his book-keeping powers represented a sort of compensation.

8. *The rooms in Herr Esch's house hitherto employed in the production of the paper shall be placed at the disposal of the firm for a period of three years. Furthermore Herr Esch shall put at the disposition of the editor for the same period two comfortably furnished front rooms with breakfast in the aforesaid house. Herr Esch shall receive from the firm's revenues a reimbursement of 25 marks per month for these services.*

9. *Should the company be converted at a later stage into a limited liability or joint stock company, the gist of the*

aforesaid conditions shall be respected.

With this projected conversion of the business into a company compelled to audit its accounts, Huguenau's house of cards of course would fall to pieces. But Huguenau did not worry his head about such trifles; for him the whole thing was a perfectly legitimate piece of business, and the only item that struck him as verging on sharp-practice was the one giving him a present of free quarters with his breakfast thrown in, but he was elated at bringing it off. Esch, on the other hand, was grieved because the contract had not run to ten clauses. They thought for a while and then they found the tenth:

10. *Any difference of interpretation which may arise out of this contract shall be decided by public arbitration.*

So in an astonishingly short time—it was the 14th of May—Huguenau was able to report that the purchase had been smoothly settled. The local subscribers did not hesitate to pay up their full capital investment of 6600 marks; of this 4000 was allotted to Herr Esch in accordance with the terms of the contract; as a prudent and solid business man Herr Huguenau allocated 1600 marks for working expenses, while as for the remaining 1000, he embellished it with the title of floating capital and employed it for his own uses. The interim share certificates were issued to the shareholders, and in a few days it was duly announced that from the first of June the paper would appear under its new editorship and in a new make-up. Huguenau had managed to induce the Major to inaugurate the new era with a leading article, and the festal number was also embellished partly with patriotic, partly with political-economical, but in greater part with patriotic-economical pronouncements from the pens of the local subscribers.

But to celebrate the new epoch Huguenau installed himself in the two rooms prepared for him in Esch's house.

CHAPTER XXXI

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (4)

The style of an epoch, it is certain, affects not merely the artist; it penetrates all contemporary activities, and crystallizes itself not only in works of art but in all the values which make up the culture of the age, and of which works of art constitute only an insignificant part; yet one is fairly at a loss when confronted by the concrete question: in how far is the style of an age incarnated in the average man, in a business man, for example, of the type of Wilhelm Huguenau? Has the man who deals in pipes of wine or textiles anything in common with the feeling for style that is evident in the shops built by Messel, or Peter Behrens's turbine power-houses? His private taste will certainly run to pinnacled villas and rooms cluttered with knick-knacks, and even if it should not, he remains a member of the public, which, however it may comport itself, is separated by a great gulf from the artist.

Yet when one regards more closely a man such as Huguenau, one sees that the gulf between him and the artist does not affect the real point at issue. One may certainly assume that in epochs which had a supreme feeling for style the lack of understanding between the artist and his contemporaries was less strongly marked than it is to-day, that for instance a new picture by Dürer in the Sebaldus Church excited general joy and admiration among even the Huguenaus of the time; for there is plenty of evidence that at that period the artist and his public were bound together in a very different kind of community, and that the painter understood the clothier and the saddler at least as profoundly as they enjoyed looking at his pictures. Of course this cannot be verified, and it may be, too, that many revolutionary spirits received but little recognition from their contemporaries; perhaps that was the case with Grünewald. But such exceptions are not particularly relevant, and in any case whether an understanding between the artist and his contemporaries ruled in the Middle Ages or not becomes a matter of indifference in face of the fact that misunderstanding and understanding alike are just as truly expressions of the legendary "Time Spirit" as a work of art in itself or any other contemporary activity.

But if this be so, then it is also a matter of indifference what direction is taken by the architectural or other taste of a business agent of Huguenau's type, and the fact that Huguenau had a certain æsthetic pleasure in machinery is likewise without importance; the sole question of any moment is whether his ordinary actions, his ordinary thoughts, were influenced by the same laws that in another sphere produced a style devoid of ornament, or evolved the theory of relativity, or led up to the philosophical conclusions of neo-Kantianism,—in other words, whether even the thought of an epoch is not a vehicle for its style, governed by that same style which attains visible and palpable expression in works of art; which amounts to the assertion that truth, the ultimate product of thought, is equally a vehicle for the style of the epoch in which it has been discovered and in which it is valid, precisely like all the other values of that epoch.

And indeed it cannot be otherwise. For it is not merely that, seen from a certain standpoint, truth is just a

value among other values; truth also governs all the actions of mankind, which are, one may say, steeped in truth: whatever a man does is plausible to him at every moment, he justifies it to himself with reasons which in his eyes represent the truth, he proves it to himself logically, and—at least in the very moment of action—his actions are always justifiable. If his actions, then, are dominated by the style of his age, so must his thoughts be; we need not decide (from the practical or epistemological standpoint) whether the act has preceded the thought or the thought the act, the motion of life the motion of reason, the *sum* the *cogito*, or the *cogito* the *sum*—all we can take into account is the rational logic of thought, for the irrational logic of action, in which style is embodied, can be perceived only in the finished product, in the result.

But with this extremely intimate connection between the substance of logical thought and the positive and negative values which action embodies, the scheme of thought which governs a man like Huguenau and compels him to act in one particular way, which determines his business methods for him and makes him draft contracts from a certain standpoint—that is to say, all the inner logic of a man like Huguenau—is given its own place in the whole logical framework of the epoch, and brought into essential relation with whatever logic permeates the productive spirit of the epoch and its visible style. And even although that rational thought, that rational logic, may be nothing but a thin and as it were one-dimensional thread which has to be wound round and round the multiplicity of dimensions presented by life, nevertheless that thought, projected in the abstraction of logical space, is an abbreviated expression of life's multiplicity and prevailing style, much in the same way as ornament is an abbreviated spatial expression of the visible style-product,—a projected abbreviation of all the works that embody style.

Huguenau is a man who acts with singleness of purpose. He organizes his day with singleness of purpose, he carries on his business affairs with his eye singly on his purpose, he evolves and concludes his contracts with his eye singly on his purpose. Behind all his purposefulness there lies a logic that is completely stripped of ornament, and the fact that this logic should demand the elimination of all ornament does not seem a too daring conclusion to draw; indeed it actually appears as good and just as every other necessary conclusion. And yet this elimination of all ornament involves nothingness, involves death, and a monstrous dissolution is concealed behind it in which our age is crumbling away.

CHAPTER XXXII

The rebel must not be confused with the criminal, though society may often stigmatize the rebel as a criminal, and though the criminal may sometimes pose as a rebel to dignify his actions. The rebel stands alone: the most faithful son of that society which is the target of his hostility and rejection, he sees in the world he combats a totality of living relationships whose threads have merely been tangled in confusion by some diabolical wickedness, and it is his chosen task to disentangle them and order them according to his own better ideas. Thus did Luther make his protest against the Pope, and so Esch might with justice be called a rebel.

This is by no means, however, a sufficient cause to asperse Huguenau, on the other hand, as a criminal. That would be not only to slander him, but also to do him grievous injustice. From the military standpoint a deserter is of course a criminal, and undoubtedly there are convinced militarists who loathe the deserter with the same intensity as, let us say, a farmer loathes a chicken thief, and like the farmer they will recognize nothing less than the death penalty as a just punishment for such a transgressor. Nevertheless there is here a principal and objective distinction: the essence of a crime lies in the fact that it can be repeated; and the fact that it can be repeated characterizes it as nothing else than a social profession. Criminalism is directed only in a very loose sense against the existing social order, even when its battle against law and order assumes American forms; to the thief and the coiner the slogans of communism cannot mean very much, and the burglar who goes about his work of nights on noiseless rubber soles is a handworker like any other handworker, he is conservative like all handworkers, and even the profession of the murderer, who with his knife between his teeth climbs up the unaccommodating wall, is not directed against the whole community, but is simply a private affair which he has to settle with his victim. There is no attempt to upset the existing regime. Proposals for the improvement or amelioration of the penal laws have never emanated from the criminal classes, closely as these things may concern them above all others. If it had been left to the criminals, we should still be hanging thieves and coiners on the gallows, and we should not even have got to the point of distinguishing murder from manslaughter, in spite of the fact that criminals usually show a fine feeling for the nuances of their professional exploits, and are delighted when the penal code adapts itself to their fine-drawn distinctions and exactions; but the very fact that they demand a corresponding distinction of penalties, the gallows for one crime, the wheel and the red-hot brand for another, the cat-o'-nine tails or the stocks for a third,—this simple and clumsy desire for recognition, in reality nothing but the groping aspiration of uneducated men who cannot express

themselves properly, and who awkwardly, in symbol as it were, demand something that represents only a small fraction of what their hearts are set on, though they scarcely know what it is; this very fact betrays the goal of their aspiration: which is that the border-land they live in, that border-land on the frontier of a world full of good ordinances, should be admitted into that greater, that good, that almost beloved order which they do not want to alter; and if criminals can conceive of such an admittance and acknowledgment only within a framework of regulated and severe penalties, yet that proves them to be aspiring and social by nature, men who are moved simply by the desire to avoid frontier friction, to go about their vocation in peace and quiet, and to accommodate themselves more and more uncomplainingly, inconspicuously and sensitively to their calling, whose point of reference is the whole structure of society and the existing order.

Rebel and criminal, they both bring their own order, their own conceptions of value into the existing regime. But while the rebel wants to subjugate the existing regime, the criminal seeks to fit himself into it. The deserter belongs neither to the one category nor the other, or perhaps he belongs to both. Huguenau may have felt this, now that he was faced with the task of setting up his own little world of reality on the outposts of that greater order and of adapting the one to the other, and even if he agreed that deserters should be sentenced to death by rifle fire, that was irrelevant for the time being, and the fact that the *Kur-Trier Herald* represented in his eyes a part of a great machine, say, a brass-plated joint where the bars met and were clamped together, a point at which the country where his own law ruled met that other one whose laws he reverenced and loved, into which he was resolved to make his way and in which he wished to dwell; this fact was not merely nonsensical; it was no more nonsensical than the language of his dreams. And all these motives were jointly responsible for the need that Huguenau felt to get hold of the *Kur-Trier Herald*; they also provide an explanation for the complete success of his transaction.

CHAPTER XXXIII

(Leading Article in the *Kur-Trier Herald* of 1st June 1918.)

THE TURNING-POINT IN THE DESTINY OF THE GERMAN PEOPLE.

Reflections by

Town Commandant Major Joachim von Pasenow.

Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.—MATTHEW iv. II.

Although the change in the editorial policy of this paper is but a trifling occurrence compared with the mighty event whose anniversary we may soon be seeing for the fourth time, yet it seems to me that, as so often is the case, we must here too regard the smaller event as a mirror of the greater.

For we too and this paper of ours stand at a parting of the ways, we too have the desire to take a new and better path which will lead us nearer to the truth, and we nurse the faith that as far as it is permitted to human powers we shall

where is the devil whom we must drive out from amidst us, where the angel whom we can call to our aid?

It beseems an old soldier to speak his mind bluntly, even at the risk that what he says may seem untimely to many people

to free ourselves from the iron embrace of the enemy nations, but also to release the Fatherland and with it the whole world from the unclean spirit which

not to be wondered at that the nations should be visited with hundredfold dissension and thousandfold disunion. For in the member with which you have sinned shall you be punished.

I hear someone objecting that in that case we should simply submit to the punishment, endure the scourge, and turn the other cheek to the persecut-

just as Luther's struggle against a Popedom which had grown corrupt was a justified struggle. And does not our master Clausewitz teach us that the spirit of righteousness is one of the weapons of war, which

it shall be said of our struggle: "His foes fled in terror before him, the evil-doer was abashed, and salvation was in his hands" (Maccabees iii. 6), yet we must not fix our thoughts on the pursuit of the flying foe, but on salvation, the salvation of our own as of other nations. We have been shortsighted, and in very truth all our sacrifices will have been in vain, if they are regarded frivolously, and God's

possesses that outward freedom which we have to fight for, only when at the same time that inward and truly divine freedom is vouchsafed to it. And we shall achieve that freedom not on our battlefields, victorious as we may be there, but we shall find it only in our hearts. For that inward freedom is commensurate with the faith which the world stands now in danger of losing. So the war is not only

according to the Scriptures? "Good and pious works will never make a man good and pious, but a good and pious man will do good and pious works," asserted Luther, writing of Christian freedom, and he goes on: "But if works can make no man pious, and a man must be pious before he can do good works, then it is evident that only the faith granted us by infinite grace through Christ

and John says (iii. 30) "He must increase, but I must decrease," and so it was with the war, which had to increase that our faith might decrease, and until our faith is re-born to blossom anew, until that happens this war may not be able to come to an end. Evil for the mere sake of evil

and it almost seems to us that first the black hordes will have to be let loose on the whole world, so that out of the fires of the Apocalypse the new brotherhood and fellowship may arise, so that once more the kingdom of Christ may be established, and new and glorious.

the black troops, armed with unchivalrous weapons, sent out against us, yet these are only the vanguard. They shall be followed by the black hosts, by the terrors of the Johannine Apocalypse. For as long as the white races are incapable of overcoming this inertia of feeling, and casting from them

embraces honour, it is a lost generation and the dreadful darkness will be round it, and no one will come to help it and its.

the venom of the blasphemer and the adventurer, which infects not only the insolent capitals of the enemy, but has not spared our Fatherland. Like an inextricable network it lies invisibly over our cities

just as first our glorious campaign of 1870 had to come so as to unite the dispersed tribes of the German people, so it will be the glory of this far greater and more dreadful war not merely to have united whole races in brotherhood, but in a sense

and the Christian faith and the grace of freedom be ours again. Then we shall be able to say: “A Christian is a faithful servant of all things and subject to every man,” no less than: “A Christian is a free master over all things and subject to no man”; for both will be true, and that is how we should think of true freedom.

I do not know whether I have been able to make myself thoroughly understood, for I myself have had to wrestle for a long time in order to arrive at these truths, and am convinced that they are still fragmentary. But here too the words of General Clausewitz may apply: “The heart-rending spectacle of danger and suffering may easily make our feelings prevail over our reasonable convictions, and in the twilight of appearance it is so hard to gain a profound and clear insight into things that vacillation is understandable and excusable. *It is always out of a mere inkling and foreboding of the truth that man acts.*”

Thus did Major von Pasenow come to grips with the problem of the war and the future of Germany, and he found it hard work. War, for which his upbringing had been a preparation, war, for whose sake he had worn a uniform during the years of his youth and donned it again four years ago, war had suddenly become no longer a matter of uniform, no longer a matter of red regimentals or blue regimentals, no longer an affair between gallant enemies who chivalrously crossed swords; no, war had proved neither the crown nor the fulfilment of a life in uniform, but had invisibly and yet more and more palpably shaken the foundations of that life, had worn threadbare the ties of morality holding it together, and through the meshes of the fabric grinned the Evil One. Spiritual forces trained in the cadet school of Culm were not adequate for the subjugation of the Evil One, and that was not surprising, since the Church itself, although much better equipped, has failed to overcome once and for all the antinomy of original sin. But the idea that once hovered before Augustine's mind as the salvation of the secular world, the dream that the Stoics had dreamed before him, the idea of a religious State embracing within it all that bears the lineaments of mankind, this exalted idea shone through the picture of heart-rending danger and suffering, and had awakened—more as a feeling, it is true, than as a reasoned conviction, rather a vague divination than a profound and clear intuition—it had awakened in the soul of the old officer too; and so a connection, hazy, indeed, and sometimes misconceived, but continuously traceable, ran from Zeno and Seneca, perhaps even from the Pythagoreans, to the thoughts of Major von Pasenow.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (5)

Logical Excursus.

Although it cannot be denied that the style of thinking prevailing, say, in the Royal Prussian Cadet School at Culm is quite different from that in a Roman Catholic seminary, yet the concept "style of thinking" is so vague that it reminds one of the vagueness of those philosophical and historical tendencies which find the crux of their methodology in the word "intuition." For the *a priori* unambiguity of thought and logic permits of no stylistic gradations, and so cannot countenance any other intuition than the mind's *a priori* apprehension of itself, discarding everything else as empirical and pathological abnormality more fitted for psychological and medical research than for philosophy. An argument for the insufficiency of the human brain's work-a-day and empirical thinking in face of the absolute logic of the self, the absolute logic of God.

Or it could be argued that the absolute formality of logic is unassailable and cannot be changed even by human agency; all that changes being the content of its propositions, their interpretation of the nature of the world; so that the question of style is at most an epistemological question and can never be a logical one. Logic, like mathematics, is devoid of style.

But is the form of logic actually so independent of its content? For somewhere, curiously enough, logic itself is identified with content, and nowhere more clearly than in so-called formal concatenations of proof; for not only are the links of these chains axioms or axiomatic propositions—such as the principle of non-contradiction—which form an impassable limit to plausibility (until one fine day that limit is passed, all the same, as for instance in the principle of the excluded middle), and whose evidence is no longer based on formal proof but only on actual content, but more than that, there would be no syllogisms at all, the whole logical machinery of drawing and proving conclusions would not even work, without the application of extra-logical principles to set the whole in motion, principles that in the long run, however far one pushes the limit of definition, are ultimately metaphysical and substantive. The structure of formal logic thus rests on substantive foundations.

The idealism of intuitional psychologizers presupposes a "feeling for truth" which provides the resting-point in which every line of inquiry, beginning with the wondering question: "What is that?" and proceeding by posing reiterated "whys?" finally comes to an end with the assertion of an axiomatic plausibility: "That is so and not otherwise." Now although in reference to the immutability of an *a priori* and purely formal logic this feeling for truth is a superfluous importation, yet in reference to the substantive element in logical proof it has claims to more reasonable respect. For the resting-points of evidence at the end of the lines of inquiry and chains of proof have detached themselves from formal immutability and yet are supposed to have a determining influence on the process of logical proof itself and on its form. The problem which this raises: "In what way can substantive content, be it a logical axiom or non-logical in its nature, so affect formal logic as to admit of variation in style of thinking while maintaining intact the

invariability of form?" this problem is no longer empirical and psychological, but methodological and metaphysical, for behind it stands in all its *a priority* the first question of all ethics: How can God permit error, how is it that a madman is allowed to live in God's world?

One can imagine a line of inquiry that never comes to a conclusion at all. All inquiries into ultimate origins obviously have this peculiarity; the problem of matter, which advances from one fundamental concept to another, from primal substance to the atom, from the atom to the electron, from the electron to the quantum of energy, and each time reaches only a temporary resting-place, is an example of such an infinite line of inquiry.

Now the point at which such a line of inquiry terminates is obviously conditioned by a feeling for truth and evidence, conditioned, therefore, by whatever axioms prevail. The doctrine of Thales, for instance, that the terminal point, the point of plausibility for the inquiry into the origin of matter, was the substance "water" permits us to infer that for Thales there was an accepted system of axioms within which the watery nature of matter seemed probable. Here it is substantive and not logically formal axioms that stop the line of inquiry, axioms of the prevailing cosmogony,—but these substantive axioms must have some relation to those of formal logic, they must at the very least be incapable of formal contradiction, for if the substantive development of the evidence did not agree with the formal there would be no plausibility in the conclusion. (And yet the possibility of disagreement between substantive and logical axioms can be discovered in the doctrine of twofold truth.) Moreover, even if one were to take up a position of complete scepticism and say *Ignorabimus*, and, denying the existence of a plausibility depending on cosmogony and of its concomitant axioms, were to assume the non-terminable nature of inquiries and regard their termination at any fixed point as a purely purposeful and yet fictitious piece of arbitrariness, still it is clear that even the plea *Ignorabimus* as such possesses a definite attribute of plausibility, which again is supported by a definite frame of logic and a definite system of logical axioms.

Perhaps the number of axioms implicit and effective in any view of the world could provide some kind of conception of these relationships, a reasonable conception extending beyond the limits of pure intuition. Naturally the precise quantity could neither be produced nor enumerated—one could only indicate the comparative multiplicity or dearth of axioms in extreme cases. The cosmogony of a primitive people, for instance, is of the utmost complexity; every object in the world has a life of its own, is in a sense *causa sui*; each tree is inhabited by its own god, each thing by its own demon; it is a world of an infinite number of things, and every line of inquiry relating to the objects in that world advances only a few steps, perhaps one step only, before stopping short at one of these axioms. In contrast with such a multiplicity of short chains of ontological reasoning, mostly chains of only one link, the chains of reasoning in a monotheistic world are already much lengthened, although not lengthened into infinity; they are lengthened, that is, to the point where they all converge in the sole First Cause, God. So that if one considers merely the ontological axioms of cosmogony—leaving out of account the others, those that are purely logical—in the two extreme cases represented by the polarized cosmogonies of primitive magic and of monotheism, the number of axioms varies from infinity to one.

In so far as language is an expression of logic, in so far as logic appears to be immanent in the structure of language, one could draw from the language of a people a conclusion about the number of its ontological axioms, the nature of logic and the variability of its "style." For the complicated ontological system of a primitive race, its widely distributed system of axioms, is what is reflected in the extraordinary complication of the structure and syntax of its language. And just as little as the change in our metaphysical view of the world can be explained on practical grounds—nobody would maintain that our Western metaphysic is more "practical" than, say, the Chinese, which stands at least on an equally high pinnacle of development—just as little can the simplification and fundamental changes in the style of languages, including their tendency to obsolescence, be explained exclusively by practical considerations, quite apart from the fact that no practical explanation suffices to account for a great number of changes and syntactical peculiarities.

But the part played by a system of axioms, whether ontological or logical, in relation to a purely logical structure, the manner in which it stamps a particular "style" on a formal logic that yet remains immutable, can be made conceivable by reference to a diagram. In certain geometrical figures an infinitely distant point is arbitrarily assumed to lie within a given finite plane, and then the figure is constructed as if this assumed point were really at an infinite distance. The relation of the various parts to each other in such a figure remain the same as if the assumed point were really at an infinite distance, but all the masses are distorted

and foreshortened. In somewhat similar fashion we may conceive that the constructions of logic are affected when the logical point of plausibility is moved from the infinite to the finite: the purely formal logic as such, its methods of inference, even its substantive associative relations, remain unaltered,—what is altered is the shape of its masses, its "style."

The farther step taken beyond the monotheistic cosmogony has been taken almost imperceptibly, and yet it is of greater significance than any preceding one: the First Cause has been moved beyond the "finite" infinity of a God that still remained anthropomorphic, into a real infinity of abstraction; the lines of inquiry no longer converge on this idea of God (they no longer converge on any point, one may say, but run parallel to each other), cosmogony no longer bases itself on God but on the eternal continuance of inquiry, on the consciousness that there is no point at which one can stop, that questions can for ever be advanced and must for ever be advanced, that there is neither a First Substance nor a First Cause discoverable, that behind every system of logic there is still a meta-logic, that every solution is merely a temporary solution, and that nothing remains but the act of questioning in itself: cosmogony has become radically scientific, and its language and its syntax have discarded their "style" and turned into mathematical expressions.

CHAPTER XXXV

Esch and Huguenau were crossing the market-place; it was Tuesday, the fourth of June, and a rainy day. Plump and rotund, Huguenau swaggered along with his overcoat thrown open. Like a conqueror, thought Esch venomously.

When they turned the corner by the Town Hall they met a melancholy procession; a German soldier, handcuffed and escorted by two men with fixed bayonets, was being conducted—probably from the railway station or the courts of justice—to the prison. It was raining, the drops were splashing on the man's face, and to wipe them away he had to lift his fettered hands every now and then and rub them against his face; it was both a clumsy and a pathetic gesture.

"What's he been doing?" said Esch to Huguenau, who seemed to be as affected as himself.

Huguenau shrugged his shoulders and muttered something about murder and robbery and child violation:

"Or he's stabbed a parson perhaps … with a kitchen knife."

Esch repeated:

"Stabbed with a knife."

"If he's a deserter he'll be shot," said Huguenau, closing the subject, and Esch saw the court martial sitting in the familiar court of justice, saw the Town Commandant sitting in judgment, heard him pronouncing the pitiless sentence, and saw the man being led out into the prison yard in the spattering rain, and while he faced the firing squad wiping for the last time with his fettered hands his face, down which ran in a mingled stream rain, tears and icy sweat.

Esch was a man of impetuous moods; he saw the world divided into black and white, he saw it dominated by the play of good and evil forces. But his impetuosity often made him see an individual where he should have seen a system, and he was already on the point of blaming the Major instead of a cold and brutal militarism for the inhumanity presently to be wreaked on the poor deserter, and was just going to say to Huguenau that the Major was a swine, when suddenly it ceased to be valid; suddenly he did not know what to think, for suddenly it was quite incomprehensible that the Major and the author of that article should be the same person.

The Major wasn't a swine, the Major was something superior, the Major had suddenly moved from the black to the white side of the world.

Esch saw the leading article quite clearly before him, and the Major's somewhat hazy but noble thoughts seemed clear and great to him, like an exposition of man's high duty to strive for freedom and justice in the world; and that was all the more remarkable as he found in it a restatement of his own task and his own aims, though transmuted, indeed, into such lofty, radiant and soaring language that all that he himself had hitherto thought or done appeared now dull, narrow, ordinary and purblind.

Esch stopped.

"One must pay for things," he said.

Huguenau was disagreeably affected by the words:

"It's easy for you to talk, you aren't going to be shot."

Esch shook his head and made a disdainful and slightly despairing gesture with his hand:

"If it was only a question of that … it's a question of one's self-respect … do you know that at one time in my life I wanted to join the Freethinkers?"

"And what of it?" said Huguenau.

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” said Esch, “there’s something in the Bible, all the same. Just you read the Major’s article.”

“A fine article,” said Huguenau.

“Well?”

Huguenau considered:

“He’s not likely to write any more articles for us … we must look out for something else.… But of course I’ll have to attend to that myself as usual, you never think of anything. And yet you fancy yourself at bringing out a paper!”

Esch gazed at him despairingly; quite obviously you could not get any further with a lump of flesh like that, the fellow couldn’t understand or didn’t want to understand. Esch would have liked to thrash him. He shouted at him:

“If you’re to set up as the angel sent to serve him, then I would rather be the devil.”

“We’re none of us angels,” replied Huguenau sagely.

Esch gave it up; they had reached the office in any case.

In the entry Marguerite was playing with a few boys from the neighbourhood. She looked up crossly at being disturbed, but Esch, paying no attention, seized her and set her on his shoulders, holding her fast by the legs.

“Look out for the doors!” he shouted, bending low at the threshold.

Huguenau entered behind them.

As they climbed the steps and Marguerite, teetering high above the banister, looked down on the courtyard, now so strangely enlarged, and on the garden that swayed before her eyes, she was seized with fear; she grabbed Esch’s forehead with her hard little hands and tried to fix her fingers in his eye-sockets.

“Be quiet up there,” Esch ordered, “look out for the door.” But it was in vain that he stooped; Marguerite made herself rigid, threw her body back, bumped her head against the lintel of the door and began to howl. Esch, from old habit accustomed to comfort weeping women with physical caresses, let the child slide down to kissing height, but now she struggled with all her strength and flew again at his eyes, so that willy-nilly he had to set her down and let her go. Marguerite wanted to escape, but Huguenau blocked the way, making signs as though to catch her. He had looked on with pleasure as she tried to struggle away from Esch, and if she had now stayed with him instead, it would have been a great satisfaction. All the same when he saw her darkened face he did not dare to hold her back, but straddled his legs and said: “Here’s the door.” The child understood him, laughed, and crept on all-fours through the door.

Esch followed her with his eyes: “She could do you in like a shot,” it sounded as if he were moved to tenderness, “the little black rascal.” Huguenau sat down opposite him: “Well, she seems to suit your taste pretty well … but I’ll have to get a desk of my own installed here fairly soon now.” “I can’t prevent you,” Esch growled, “and anyhow, it’s about time you began to do some editorial work.” Huguenau’s thoughts were still with the child: “That kid’s always about the place too.” Esch smiled slightly: “Children are a blessing and a trial, Herr Huguenau, but you don’t understand that yet.” “I understand well enough that you’re crazy about her … otherwise why should you want to adopt somebody else’s brat?” “Your own or somebody else’s, it doesn’t matter: I’ve already told you that.” “Oh, it matters all right, when another man’s had the pleasure.” “You don’t understand that,” shouted Esch, jumping up.

He prowled up and down the room a few times, then went to the corner where the files of newspapers were piled up, pulled out a paper—it was the special issue—and began to study the Major’s article.

Huguenau regarded him with interest. Esch held his head clasped in his hands, his short grey brush of hair escaped from between his fingers,—he had a passionate, almost an ascetic appearance, and Huguenau, desirous of banishing some vague, unpleasant memory, said cheerfully: “You just see, Esch, we’ll make a great thing of the paper yet.” Esch replied: “The Major is a good man.” “That may be,” said Huguenau, “but it would be better for you to be thinking of what we can make out of the paper,” he had stepped up to Esch, and, as though to waken him up, tapped him on the shoulder, “The *Herald* must be asked for in Berlin and Nürnberg, and it must be on show in the Hauptwache Coffee House in Frankfort too, you know Frankfort, don’t you? … it must become a paper for the whole world.”

Esch paid no attention. He indicated with his finger a passage in the article: “But if works can make no man pious, and a man must be pious before he can do good works … do you know what that means? it means that the child doesn’t matter, but only your feeling about it; another’s or your own, it’s all one, do you hear, it’s all one!”

Huguenau felt disappointed somehow: “All I know is that you’re a fool and that you’ve brought the paper to ruin with your feelings,” he said and left the room.

The door had slammed long since, but Esch still sat there staring at it, sat and thought. It was not by any means clear, but Huguenau might be right all the same about one’s feelings. Nevertheless it looked as if

there was some hope of order at last. The world was divided into good and evil, debit and credit, black and white, and even if a book-keeping error should happen to creep in, then it must be expunged, and it would be expunged. Esch had grown calmer. Peacefully his hands rested on his knees, he sat placidly staring through closed eyelids at the door, saw through closed lids the whole room, which now strangely transformed itself into a landscape—or was it a picture postcard?—and was like a kiosk among green trees, the trees of the Schlossberg at Badenweiler; he saw the Major's face, and it was the face of a greater and higher being. And Esch sat for so long that at last, filled with wonder, he knew no longer where he had got to, and only with an effort did he manage to return to his reading. True, he could have recited the article by heart, word for word, yet he forced himself to read on, and now he knew once more what side he belonged to in this world. For the reflections which the Major had addressed to the German people had made an impression on one part of the German nation, even if it was not a very important part; they had made an impression on Herr Esch.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Four women were scrubbing the hospital ward.

Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck entered and looked at them for a moment.

"Well, how are things with you?"

"What can you expect, Herr Surgeon-Major …?"

The women sighed, then they went on scrubbing again.

One of them raised her head:

"My man's coming home on leave next week."

"Great, Tielden … the bed will fairly bounce then."

Frau Tielden blushed under her brown leathery skin. The others laughed heartily. And Frau Tielden laughed with them.

All at once a noise, somewhat like a bark, was heard from one of the beds. It was not so much a bark, however, as a breathless, heavy and very painful expulsion of something that was scarcely a sound and came from far within.

Gödicke of the Landwehr sat up in his bed; his features were painfully distorted, and it was he who had laughed in such a strange fashion.

It was the first sound that had been got out of him ever since his arrival in the hospital (if one does not take into account his first whimperings).

"A lewd rascal," said Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck, "why, he can laugh!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (5)

The sickly spring-time of an adamant law,
The sickly spring-time of a Jewish bride,
The sickly din of the city, that yet tongue-tied
Lies trapped and netted in invisible snares,
A summer day of stone no warmth can thaw,

A sickly sky
looks down
on asphalt
squares,
On streets
like
chasms, on
a stony
waste that
wears
Out like a
scabby sore
the earth's
grey hide.
O city of
lying light,
O city of
lying
prayers,
The
penitent
desires no
verdant
tree,
He seeks
but
penitential
caves,
where he
Implores
the Law to
yield him
holiness
Uprising
like a
fountain
from deep
thought,
From holy
words, from
doubts,
from fear
distraught.
It is the city
of exiles, of
penitents in
distress,
The city of
the people
chosen by
God,
A race that
breeds for
duty,
passionless,
And only
counts its
sons, whose
old men
nod
Praying at
windows, a
monk-
bearded
race
Bound ever
to its God

with fasts
and thongs,
The while
its women
knead the
unleavened
bread
And votive
oil flames
raise their
pallid
tongues:
A race that
marries to
beget in
bed
The pallid
youth with
the actor's
beard and
face,
The
youthful
Jacob to
whom
angels
bend,
Whom
truth guides
on a
journey
that will
end
At that far
well by
which the
angels sank,
At that far
well where
Rachel's
wethers
drank.
Grey city,
the pallid
nomads'
halting-
place
Upon their
road to
Zion, their
way to
God,
A godless
city in an
invisible
net,
A vacant
mass of
stone with
curses
laden
And
sorrow;
where the
Salvation
Army
maiden

Tinkles her tambourine, so that the sinner yet
May find the true way and return to grace,
The way to Zion, to love's holy place.—
In this town of Berlin, in these spring days
Did Nuchem Sussin meet the girl Marie,
And for a while they felt a sweet amaze
And each fell down in spirit on one knee;
The uplifted hand of Fate they did not see,
Zion they saw; their hearts were filled with praise.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

For almost two years Heinrich Wendling had not been home on leave. Yet in spite of this Hanna was surprised, as surprised as though some irrational and incomprehensible event had burst in upon her, when the letter arrived in which he announced his homecoming. The journey from Salonika would take six days at least, probably even longer, but in any case it was only a matter of days. Hanna dreaded his arrival as though she had a secret lover to conceal from him. Every day's delay was to her like an act of grace, yet every evening she went through her night toilet even more scrupulously than usual, and she lay in bed each morning too even longer than usual, waiting, dreading lest the returning wanderer might take possession of her immediately, filthy and unshaven as he was. And even though she felt she should be ashamed of such fancies, and for that very reason hoped that some offensive or other accident might cancel his leave, yet she felt as well the presence of a still stronger, a very strange hope that lurked somewhere, a vague presentiment that she did not want to acknowledge and indeed did not acknowledge, and which was like one's sensation before a grave operation: one had to submit to it in order to be protected from something fatal towards which one was involuntarily striving; it was like a last terrifying refuge, and dark as it was, yet it rescued one from a profounder darkness. To dismiss as masochism such an attitude of hopeful dread and terrified waiting would be to leave unexplored all but the mere surface of the spirit. And the only explanation that Hanna could find for her state, in so far as she was aware of it at all, was very like the fatuous conviction of old women that marriage is the sole means of putting an end once and for all to the various sufferings of anæmic girls. No, she could not dare to examine it more closely, it was a tangle into which she had no wish to penetrate, and though with one part of her she expected that as soon as Heinrich came in everything would be the same again, quite naturally, yet she divined with equal intensity that never would things be the same again.

Summer had really come at last. “Rose Cottage” did honour to its name, although in deference to the times vegetables were cultivated rather than flowers, and although the semi-invalid jobbing gardener was incapable of attending properly to his business. But the crimson ramblers did not allow even the war to restrain them and had climbed up to the cherubs at each side of the door; the beds of peonies were pink and white, and the rows of heliotrope and stock on the border of the lawn were in full blossom. In front of the house the green landscape stretched peacefully, the spacious sweep of the valley held one’s gaze and carried it to the edge of the woods; the forester’s house, exposed to the eye in winter so that every one of its windows could be seen, was again smothered in green; the vineyards too had greened over, the woods lay dark, darker than ever now that black clouds were approaching from the mountains.

In the afternoon Hanna had taken her chair outside. She lay back in it beneath the chestnut-trees and gazed at the advancing clouds, whose shadows marched across the fields, transforming the bright clear green into a dark and strangely restful greenish violet; as the shadow stretched across the garden and the air suddenly became cool and cellarlike, the flowers, until now sealed up by the heat, began all at once to exhale their perfumes as though their breath had been released. Or perhaps it was the sudden coolness that now gave Hanna leisure to feel their scent; yet it was so sudden, so unique, so vehement, this breaking wave of sweet perfume, cool and magical as an evening in a southern garden, as the falling dusk on the rocky beach of a Tyrrhenian sea. So the earth lay on the shore of a sea of cloud that broke in waves of rain, the soft, thick rain of thunder-showers, and Hanna, standing at the open veranda door, could smell the south; and even though she breathed in almost greedily the soft humidity that felt so cool and fresh in her nostrils, yet with the memory of that southern fragrance there had also been wafted to her the fear which she had felt for the first time during her honeymoon, standing on the seashore one rainy evening in Sicily; the hotel lay behind her, the flowers in the hotel garden perfumed the air, and she did not know who the strange man was that stood beside her—he was called Dr Wendling.

She started; the gardener had hurried across the path to put the garden implements in a place of safety out of the rain; she started, because she could not help thinking that it was a burglar who had broken in, although she knew quite well what the man was about. If Walter had not come out to her she would have fled into the house and locked the door. Walter had seated himself on the door-step; he stretched out his naked legs into the rain and occupied himself in cautiously loosening the dried crust of a scar on his knee, afterwards contentedly stroking the new pink skin. Hanna too sat down on the door-step; she clasped her hands round her legs, her beautiful slender legs—she too wore no stockings when she was in the house or the garden—and her smooth shins felt cool to the touch.

By now the rain had beaten down the scent of the flowers which it had awakened at first, and the air smelt only of moist earth. The brown-flecked tiled roof of the garden-house gleamed with wet, and when the gardener once more trudged down the path the gravel no longer crunched dryly under his feet, but rattled its wet and separate pebbles. Hanna put her arm round her son’s shoulders,—why couldn’t they remain always sitting like this, calmly at rest in a cool and cleanly world? only a very little of her fear was left. All the same she said: “If there’s more thunder like this during the night, Walter, you can come in beside me.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

When Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck and Dr Kessel entered the dining-room of the hotel, the Major was already sitting at his accustomed place. He was reading the *Cologne News*, which had just arrived. The two gentlemen said good-evening, and the Major rose and invited them to sit at his table.

The Surgeon-Major most tactlessly referred to the newspaper:

“Are we to have the pleasure, Herr Major, of reading you in other papers too?”

The Major simply shook his head, handed the paper across the table, and indicating the column containing the reports from the Front said:

“Bad news.”

Dr Kühlenbeck glanced over the reports:

“Really no worse than usual, Herr Major.”

The Major looked up questioningly.

“Herr Major, all news is bad except one thing, and that is—peace.”

“You’re right there,” said the Major, “but it must be an honourable peace.”

“Right,” said Kühlenbeck, lifting his glass, “then here’s to peace.”

The other two gentlemen clinked glasses with him and the Major repeated again:

“To an honourable peace … otherwise what should all those sacrifices have been made for?” As though he wanted to say something more, he still held his glass in his hand but remained silent; at last, however,

he shook off his immobility and said: “Honour is by no means a mere convention … once upon a time poison-gas would have been rejected as a weapon of warfare.”

The gentlemen made no reply, and went on drinking their wine.

Then Dr Kessel said:

“What’s the good of all those beautiful theories about war-time food? … When I come home at night I can scarcely stand on my legs; for a man well on in years the food simply isn’t enough.”

Kühlenbeck said:

“You’re a defeatist, Kessel: it’s been demonstrated that diabetes has been reduced to a minimum, and with carcinoma it seems to be the same … it’s only your personal misfortune that you’re not a diabetic … besides, my dear chap, if you do feel pains in your legs … we’re none of us getting younger.”

Major von Pasenow said:

“Honour isn’t mere inertia of feeling.”

“I don’t quite understand, Herr Major,” said Dr Kühlenbeck.

The Major gazed into vacancy:

“Oh, it was nothing … as you know … my son fell at Verdun … he would be twenty-eight now.…”

“But he wasn’t your only son, Herr Major?”

The Major did not reply at once, it may be that he regarded the question as an indiscretion. Finally he said:

“Yes, there’s my younger son … and the two girls … the boy will soon be called up too … one must render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s …” he stopped, then he went on: “You see, the cause of all the evil is that we don’t render to God the things that are God’s.”

Dr Kühlenbeck said:

“We don’t even render to human beings the things that are theirs … it seems to me we should begin with that first.”

“God first,” said Major von Pasenow.

Kühlenbeck threw out his chin; his dark grey beard jutted out into the air:

“We doctors are blatant materialists, I’m afraid.”

The Major said deprecatingly:

“You mustn’t say that.”

Dr Kessel too dissented; a true doctor was always an idealist. Kühlenbeck laughed:

“It’s true, I forgot your panel patients.”

After a while Dr Kessel said:

“As soon as I have half a chance I’ll take up my chamber music again.”

And the Major remarked that his wife too loved her playing. He thought for a little and then he added: “Spohr, an excellent composer.”

CHAPTER XL

Since it had been rumoured that Gödicke had laughed, his roommates had tried everything possible to make him laugh again. The grossest stories were dished up to him, and as he lay in bed hardly anyone passed without hopefully shaking the bed until it bounced up and down. But it was of no avail. Gödicke did not laugh again. He remained dumb.

Until one day Sister Carla brought him a postcard: “Gödicke, your wife has written to you …” Gödicke did not stir, “I’ll read it to you.” And Sister Carla read out to him that his faithful wife had heard nothing from him now for a long time, that she and the children were well, and that they all hoped he would soon be coming back. “I’ll answer it for you,” said Sister Carla. Gödicke gave not a sign of comprehension, and one might have thought that he had really understood nothing. And probably he would actually have succeeded in concealing from any eyewitness the tempest in his soul, that tempest which jumbled together the constituents of his ego and in rapid succession heaved them to the surface to submerge them just as rapidly again in the dark waves, he might have succeeded in calming the storm and gradually laying it altogether, had not the practical joker of the ward, Josef Settler the dragoon, passed by at that moment and as usual caught hold of the foot of the bed to make it oscillate a little. At that Gödicke of the Landwehr gave a cry which by no means resembled the laugh that was expected of him and that he was really under an obligation to provide; he gave an angry and heavy cry, sat up, by no means so slowly and laboriously as he was accustomed to do, and he snatched the postcard from Sister Carla, and he tore the postcard to pieces. Then he sank back, for the violent movement had started his pains again, and clasped his abdomen with his hands.

So there he lay looking up at the roof, and tried to reinstate a minimum of order among his thoughts. He

was conscious of having acted rightly; he had with full justification turned away the intruder. That this intruder was the servant-girl Anna Lamprecht with her three children was almost immaterial, and could be quickly forgotten again. Indeed he was very glad that the Gödicke who had made an honest woman of the servant-girl Lamprecht had been so expeditiously called to order and relegated to his place behind the dark barrier,—there he would have to wait until he was summoned. Nevertheless with that the matter was not settled; an intruder who comes once may come again, even though he is not summoned, and once one door is opened, then every other door may fly open of itself. With terror he felt, though he could not have formulated it, that this intrusion into one part of his soul had affected all the other parts by sympathy, indeed that through it they were all being changed. It was like a humming in his ears, a humming of the soul, a humming of the ego that hummed so violently that he could feel it in all his body; but it was also as though a clod of earth had been pushed under one's tongue, a stifling clod that deranged all one's thoughts. Or perhaps it was something else, but in any case it was something beyond one's power, something before which one felt helpless. It was as though one wanted to spread the mortar before laying a brick, and the mortar hardened on the trowel. It was as though a foreman were there driving one to work at an illegal and impossible speed, and causing the bricks to be piled with furious haste on the scaffolding, so that they towered in great heaps and could not be worked off. The scaffolding must collapse if one did not at once put the winch and the concrete-mixing machine out of action to stop the whole business. Best of all if one's eyes could grow together again and one's ears be sealed again: the man Gödicke must see nothing, hear nothing, eat nothing. If the pain were not so bad now he would go into the garden and fetch a handful of earth to stop up all the holes. And while he clasped his sore abdomen, from which his children had issued, while he pressed his hands down on it as though never again must anything issue from him, while he clenched his teeth and bit his lips so that not even a sigh of pain might escape them, it seemed to him that thus his powers were increased, and that those waxing powers must raise the scaffolding to ever higher and airier heights, that he himself was omnipresent on every level and storey of that scaffolding, and that at last he would manage to stand quite alone on the topmost storey, at the summit of the scaffolding; that he would be able to stand there, dare to stand there, released from all pain, singing as he had always sung when he was up aloft. The carpenters would be working beneath him, hammering and driving in nails, and he would spit down, as he had always spat, spit down in a wide arc over them, and where the spittle struck and rebounded trees would grow up, which, no matter how high they grew, would never reach the height where he stood.

When Sister Carla came with the washing basin and the towels, he was lying peacefully, and peacefully too let himself be packed into the compresses. For two whole days he again refused meat and drink. And then an incident happened that made him begin to speak.

CHAPTER XLI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (6)

To my own surprise I had again begun to occupy myself with my thesis on the disintegration of values. Although I hardly ever left the house, my work proceeded but slowly. Nuchem Sussin often came to see me, seating himself on the grey tails of his frock-coat. He never unbuttoned it; it was probably a kind of shame that prevented him. I often asked myself how these people could put any trust in Dr Litwak, whose short jacket flouted all their prejudices. Until I came to the conclusion that the walking-stick he carried before him might represent a sort of substitute for his lack of coat-tails. But that, of course, was a mere assumption.

It took me a long time to find out what Sussin was really after. When he seated himself he never neglected to say "With your kind permission," and after a short embarrassed silence he would then bring up some juristic problem: whether the Government was empowered to confiscate food or fat that was already in one's house or on one's plate; whether the maintenance allowance received by soldiers' wives could be applied to taking out a life insurance policy … one simply could not tell what he was trying to get at, he seemed to be pulling wires at random, and yet one had the feeling that out of all this real problems were emerging, or that in his mind a juridical landscape lay outspread, which one was challenged to survey through these artificial and distorted lenses.

Even when he took up a book and held it in front of his shortsighted eyes, he seemed to be reading quite other things out of it. He had an immeasurable respect for books, but he could laugh uproariously over a few lines of Kant, and was astonished when I did not join in. So it seemed to him an extraordinarily good joke when he found this maxim while looking over Hegel: *The principle of magic consists in this, that the connection between the means and the effect shall not be recognized.* He certainly despised me for not seeing the funny side of things as he did, and strangely enough I was inclined to ascribe to him a truer, if also more

complicated, insight than I myself possessed. In any case it was only at things such as these that I had ever seen him laugh.

And he had some feeling for music. A much-beribboned lute hung in my room. I imagine that it had belonged to my landlady's son: he was either in captivity or missing. Every time he came Sussin begged me to "play something" and would not believe me when I said I couldn't. He thought I was too shy. But by way of this he managed at last to reach his real theme:

"Have you ever heard the people playing … the ones in uniform? … very beautiful."

He meant the Salvation Army, and smiled guiltily at my guessing it.

"I'm going this evening to listen. Will you come too?"

CHAPTER XLII

Huguenau's delight in the paper had not lasted long, not even for a whole month. It was still June, and Huguenau was sick of the whole business. In his first enthusiasm he had succeeded in bringing off the great idea of the special number and the Major's leading article; but as nothing fresh had immediately occurred to him he had lost interest. It was as though he had flung a toy into the corner; he no longer liked it. And even although this dislike perhaps masked an intuition that one really could not make a great newspaper out of a provincial rag, yet he was merely aware of boredom, he simply did not want to hear anything more about it, and felt the independent reality of the newspaper routine as an interference with himself. If at one time he could not get quickly enough to his work, he now loved to linger in bed, dawdled unconscionably over his breakfast, and only with repugnance could drag himself to the backyard where the office was; indeed quite often it happened that he got no farther than the kitchen, where he discussed the price of food with Frau Esch. And if he finally did reach the editorial office, generally he clattered down the steps again in a little while and stole in to look at the printing-press.

Marguerite was playing in the garden. Huguenau shouted across the courtyard to her: "Marguerite, I'm in the printing-shed."

The child came running, and they went in together. " 'Morning," said Huguenau curtly, for since Lindner and the assistant compositor had become his subordinates he had set himself to be as curt as possible with them. The two men, however, did not seem to worry much about that, and he had once more the feeling that they looked down on him as a man who knew nothing about machines. At present they were working in the case-room, and Huguenau, with the child hanging on to his hand, did his best to look over their shoulders with the air of an expert, but was relieved when he was out of the case-room again and back beside his printing-press.

For he still loved the printing-press. A man who all his life has sold commodities produced by machines, but for whom factories and the possessors of machines remain in a class above him, a class he can never attain, such a man will assuredly regard it as a wonderful experience if he himself suddenly becomes the possessor of a machine; and it may well be that there will dawn in him that affectionate attitude to machines which one almost always finds in boys and in young races, an attitude that glorifies the machine and projects it into the exalted and free plane of their own desires and of mighty and heroic deeds. For hours the boy can watch the locomotive in the station, deeply content that it should shunt the trucks from one line to another; and for hours Wilhelm Huguenau could sit before his printing-press and watch it affectionately with the serious and vacant gaze of a boy behind his glasses, quite satisfied because it was in motion, because it ate up paper and gave it out again. And the ardour of his love for that living entity filled his being so completely that it left room neither for ambition nor even for any desire to understand that incomprehensible and marvellous mechanical function; admiringly and tenderly, almost timidly, he accepted it as it was.

Marguerite had crawled up on to the paper bales, and Huguenau sat on the rough bench which stood beside them. He gazed at the machine, gazed at the child. The machine was his property, it belonged to him, the child belonged to Esch. For a while they tossed to each other a sheet of paper rolled into a ball; then Huguenau grew tired of the game, he crossed his legs, wiped his glasses, and said:

"Something more could be made out of the advertising side."

The child went on playing with the paper ball.

Huguenau continued:

"It's worse even than I imagined. The paper was too dear at the price … all the same, we own the press; you like the printing-press, don't you?"

"Yes, let's play at printing-presses, Uncle Huguenau!"

Marguerite came down from her paper bales and climbed on to his knee. Then they took each other by the arms, threw their bodies rhythmically backwards and forwards, and punctuated the motion with: "Pum,

pum."

Huguenau put on the brake. Marguerite remained sitting stridelegs on his knees. Huguenau was a little short of breath:

"The paper was too dear … if things go well, we'll bring the circulation up to four hundred … but if we can get two pages of advertisements it will pay and we'll grow rich. Won't we, Marguerite?"

Marguerite jumped up and down on his knee, and Huguenau set her in brisk trotting motion; she laughed, for it made her words come in jerks:

"Yes, you'll get rich, you'll get rich."

"Are you glad, Marguerite?"

"Then you'll give me lots of money."

"Oho?"

"Lots of money."

"I tell you what, Marguerite, we'll hire some boys, they'll collect the advertisements … in the villages … all over the place. For a commission."

The child nodded gravely.

"I've thought it all out already, marriage announcements, sales, and so forth and so forth … just fetch the lay-outs from Herr Lindner," and he shouted across to the case-room: "Lindner, the advertisement lay-outs."

The child ran over and brought them back.

"Look here, we'll give our agents a copy of these … you'll see what a draw that'll be." He had taken her on his knee again and they studied the lay-outs together. Then Huguenau said:

"So, you want the money so as to run away from them … where do you want to go?"

Marguerite shrugged her shoulders:

"Anywhere."

Huguenau considered:

"If you go through the Eifel country you'll come to Belgium. There's good people there."

Marguerite asked:

"Will you come too?"

"Perhaps … yes, perhaps later."

"When later?"

She snuggled against him, but Huguenau said suddenly and brusquely: "That's enough," lifted her up and set her on the press. Strangely clear there rose up again the picture of that murderer, that violator of children chained to his pallet, and it disturbed him. "Everything in its time," he said, contemplating the girl, who sat, slender and animated, on the solid inanimate machine, and yet in some way belonged to it. If the machine were set in motion it would swallow up Marguerite just as it did the paper, and he made quite certain that the belt was not on. Almost fearfully he repeated: "Everything in its time, the time will come all right … he doesn't disturb us here at any rate."

And while he was wondering what it was that the time would come for, he remembered Esch with his big teeth, that lean insufferable pedagogue who would never leave him in peace and was always insisting on the terms of the contract and trying to push editorial duties upon him,—insisting on the terms of the contract and demanding that he should sit there all day and work, probably expecting him, too, to put on a blue overall. Stand on his rights, the fellow could do that, but as for ideas, he hadn't a single one! And now Huguenau was filled with extraordinary satisfaction at the thought that his schoolmaster had not once yet succeeded in forcing him to work.

As he folded up the advertisement lay-outs he said:

"We'll pay out the schoolmaster yet, Marguerite—what do you say?"

"Lift me down," said the child.

Huguenau went up to the printing-press, but when the little girl put her arm round his neck he remained standing for a moment in silent reverie, for now he had found what he had been looking for: in secret he was actually set above the schoolmaster! for he had himself offered to exercise a surveillance over the dangerous fellow, and the Major had approved of it! It dawned on Huguenau that he had been led here simply in order to find his real goal in life, and that his life would be completely fulfilled if he could succeed in completely unmasking Herr Esch's secret machinations. Yes, that was it, and Huguenau gave Marguerite a hearty kiss on her cheek that was smeared with printing-ink.

But Herr Esch sat upstairs in the editorial office, relieved that he could continue his labours and not give them up to Huguenau. For among other things he was convinced that Huguenau would never be capable of running the paper on the lines laid down by the Major, and he was bent on doing so himself, for in that way he might serve the Major and the good cause.

CHAPTER XLIII

Dr Flurschütz was examining Jaretzki's arm stump in the operating-theatre:

"Looks splendid … the chief will be sending you off one of these days … if you agree to it … to a convalescent home."

"Of course I agree to it; high time one was out of this."

"I think so too, or we'll have you on our hands next with delirium tremens."

"Well, what is there to do but drink? … it's here that I really learned to do it."

"Didn't you ever drink before?"

"No … well, a little, just like everybody else.… I was in the polytechnic in Brunswick, you know … where did you get your degree?"

"Erlangen."

"Oh well, you must have drunk a bit in your time too … one always does in small towns … and what with sitting about as one has to here, it comes back of itself …" Flurschütz was still probing and fingering the arm stump "… look there, that one bad spot simply won't heal … how about my artificial arm?"

"Been ordered … we shan't send you off without the arm."

"Right, but see that it comes soon … if you hadn't your work to do here, you would start drinking again too."

"Couldn't say … I might find something else to do … really, I've never seen you with a book yet, Jaretzki."

"Look here, tell me honestly: do you actually read all those piles of books that you keep lying about in your room?"

"Yes."

"Extraordinary … and has that any meaning or object?"

"Not the slightest."

"That's a relief … look here, Dr Flurschütz … all right, I'll keep still … you've dispatched a good few people in your time, that's part of your job of course, but when one has deliberately done in a few … well it seems to me one hasn't any need to look into a book for all the rest of one's life … it's a sort of feeling I've got … one has achieved everything … and that's the reason too why the war will never end.…"

"A daring speculation, Jaretzki; what have you been drinking to-day?"

"I'm as sober as a new-born babe.…"

"Well, that's finished … we'll give the artificial arm a trial in a fortnight at latest … then you must really go into one of those schools where they teach you to use it … you want to draw, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so, only I simply can't imagine it to myself."

"And what about the General Electric?"

"Oh, very well, let it be the artificial-arm school … sometimes it seems to me that you snicked off the thing quite unnecessarily … simply out of a sense of justice, so to speak, because I once flung a hand-grenade between a Frenchman's legs.…"

Flurschütz looked at him attentively:

"I say, Jaretzki, pull yourself together. You're quite alarming … how many have you really had to-day?"

"Nothing worth speaking of … besides I'm really grateful to you for your sense of justice, and the operation was very well done … I feel on much better terms with the world now … on bloody good terms, everything settled … and the General Electric's simply pining for my arrival."

"Seriously, Jaretzki, you should go there."

"But I just want to tell you … it was the wrong arm you took … this one here," Jaretzki tapped with two fingers on the plate-glass cover of the instrument-case, "this one here was the one I flung the hand-grenade with … probably that's why I feel it hanging from my shoulder like a dead weight."

"That will soon be all right, Jaretzki."

"Oh, everything's all right as it is."

CHAPTER XLIV

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (6)

The logic of the soldier demands that he shall throw a hand-grenade between the legs of his enemy:

the logic of the army demands in general that all military resources shall be exploited with the utmost rigour and severity, resulting, if necessary, in the extermination of peoples, the demolition of cathedrals, the bombardment of hospitals and operating-theatres:

the logic of the business man demands that all commercial resources shall be exploited with the utmost

rigour and efficiency to bring about the destruction of all competition and the sole domination of his own business, whether that be a trading house or a factory or a company or other economic body:

the logic of the painter demands that the principles of painting shall be followed to their conclusions with the utmost rigour and thoroughness, at the peril of producing pictures which are completely esoteric, and comprehensible only by those who produce them:

the logic of the revolutionist demands that the revolutionary impulse shall be pursued with the utmost rigour and thoroughness for the achievement of a revolution as an end in itself, as, indeed, the logic of politicians in general demands that they shall obtain an absolute dictatorship for their political aims:

the logic of the bourgeois climber demands that the watchword "enrichissez-vous" shall be followed with the most absolute and uncompromising rigour:

in this fashion, in this absolute devotion to logical rigour, the Western world has won its achievements,—and with the same thoroughness, the absolute thoroughness that abrogates itself, must it eventually advance *ad absurdum:*

war is war, *l'art pour l'art*, in politics there's no room for compunction, business is business,—all these signify the same thing, all these appertain to the same aggressive and radical spirit, informed by that uncanny, I might almost say that metaphysical, lack of consideration for consequences, that ruthless logic directed on the object and on the object alone, which looks neither to the right nor to the left; and this, all this, is the style of thinking that characterizes our age.

One cannot escape from this brutal and aggressive logic that exhibits itself in all the values and non-values of our age, not even by withdrawing into the solitude of a castle or of a Jewish dwelling; yet a man who shrinks from knowledge, that is to say, a romantic, a man who must have a bounded world, a closed system of values, and who seeks in the past the completeness he longs for, such a man has good reason for turning to the Middle Ages. For the Middle Ages possessed the ideal centre of values that he requires, possessed a supreme value to which all other values were subordinate: the belief in the Christian God. Cosmogony was as dependent on that central value (more, it could be scholastically deduced from it) as man himself; man with all his activities formed a part of the whole world-order which was merely the reflected image of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, the closed and finite symbol of an eternal and infinite harmony. The dictum "Business is business" was not permitted to the medieval merchant, competitive struggle being forbidden to him; the medieval artist knew nothing of *l'art pour l'art*, but only that he must serve his faith; medieval warfare claimed absolute authority only when it was waged in the service of the faith. It was a world reposing on faith, a final not a causal world, a world founded on being, not on becoming; and its social structure, its art, the sentiments that bound it together, in short, its whole system of values, was subordinated to the all-embracing living value of the faith: the faith was the point of plausibility in which every line of inquiry ended, the faith was what enforced logic and gave it that specific colouring, that style-creating impulse, which expresses itself not only in a certain style of thinking, but continues to shape a style characterizing the whole epoch for so long as the faith survives.

But thought dared to take the step from monotheism into the abstract, and God, the personal God made visible in the finite infinity of the Trinity, became an entity whose name could no longer be spoken and whose image could no longer be fashioned, an entity that ascended into the infinite neutrality of the Absolute and there was lost to sight in the dread vastness of Being, no longer immanent but beyond the reach of man.

In the violence of this revolution caused by the radical application, one might even say by the unleashing, of logic, in this removal of the point of plausibility to a new plane of the infinite, in this withdrawal of faith from concrete life, the simple sufficiency of existence was also destroyed. The style-creating force seems to vanish from concrete expression at this point, and beside the mass of the Kantian structure and the flames of revolution all that we find is rococo and an Empire degenerated overnight into Biedermeyer. For even although the Empire, and shortly after it the romantic movement, recognizing the discrepancy between this spiritual revolution and the existing forms of concrete expression, looked to the past for help, calling in the antique and the Gothic, yet the new development could not be checked: immanent Being had been analysed into pure function, the physical world itself had been analysed into such abstraction that two generations later even Space could be eliminated from it; the decision for pure abstraction was already irrevocable. And the infinite remoteness, the inaccessible noumenal remoteness of that point towards which all lines of inquiry and chains of probability were now destined to strive, rendered impossible at one stroke the binding of all single value-systems to a central value; the abstract ruthlessly invaded the logic of every single value-making activity, stripping its content bare, and not only forbade it to deviate at all from the form determined by its function, insisting on purely functional structure whether in architecture or in any other constructive activity, but has also radicalized so thoroughly the single value-systems that these, being thrown back on themselves and referred to the Absolute, have separated from one another, now run parallel

to each other, and, since they can no longer combine in the service of a supreme value, claim equality one with the other: like strangers they exist side by side, an economic value-system of "good business" next to an æsthetic one of *l'art pour l'art*, a military code of values side by side with a technical or an athletic, each autonomous, each "in and for itself," each "unfettered" in its autonomy, each resolved to push home with radical thoroughness the final conclusions of its logic and to break its own record. And woe to the others, if in this conflict of systems that precariously maintain an equilibrium one should gain the preponderance and overtop all the rest, as the military system does in war, or as the economic system is now doing, a system to which even war is subordinate,—woe to the others! For the triumphant system will embrace the whole of the world, it will overwhelm all other values and exterminate them as a cloud of locusts lays waste a field.

But man, who was once the image of God, the mirror of a universal value created by himself, man has fallen from his former estate: he may still have some dim remembrance of his one-time security, he may still ask himself what is this superimposed logic that has perverted his life; yet he is driven out into the horror of the infinite, and, no matter how he shudders at the prospect, no matter how romantically and sentimentally he may yearn to return to the fold of faith, he is helplessly caught in the mechanism of the autonomous value-systems, and can do nothing but submit himself to the particular value that has become his profession, he can do nothing but become a function of that value—a specialist, eaten up by the radical logic of the value into whose jaws he has fallen.

CHAPTER XLV

Huguenau had arranged with Frau Esch that she should give him his midday meal every day. That suited his convenience in all sorts of ways, and Frau Esch did her best for him, she had to be given credit for that.

One day when he went up for his dinner, he found Esch sitting at the newly laid table absorbed in a black-bound book. Huguenau looked inquisitively over his shoulder and recognized the woodcuts of a Bible. As he seldom allowed himself to be surprised at anything, except perhaps when someone overreached him in business, and that happened rarely enough, he merely said: "Aha!" and waited for his food to be served up.

Frau Esch, broad-hipped, sexless, dowdy, passed through the room; her indeterminately fair hair was caught untidily in a knot. But in passing she touched her husband's bony shoulder with an uncalled-for gesture, and Huguenau suddenly had the feeling that of nights she must know very well how to avail herself of her conjugal state. The thought was unpleasant, and so he asked:

"Well, Esch, are you preparing to go into a monastery?"

Esch glanced up from his book:

"That's just the question, whether any escape is permissible," adding with his accustomed rudeness, "but you don't understand that."

Frau Esch brought in the soup, and Huguenau's disagreeable thoughts would not leave him. The two of them lived together like lovers, without desiring children, and it was probably to cloak this that they wanted to adopt the girl Marguerite. Actually he was sitting on the chair where their son should have been. So with simple guile he took up the joke again and told Frau Esch that her husband was going into a monastery. Whereupon Frau Esch asked whether it was true that in all the monasteries there were suspicious goings-on among the monks. And she laughed over some dissolute fancy that rose in her mind. But then her eyes turned slowly and suspiciously towards her husband:

"Yes, you're capable of anything."

This was obviously painful to Herr Esch; Huguenau noted that he flushed and returned her glance with anger. Nevertheless, resolved not to lose his prestige in front of his wife but rather to enhance it, Esch declared that after all it was simply a matter of habit, but that everybody knew well enough that even in a monkery there wasn't the slightest need to take refuge in these practices, on the contrary, he flattered himself that even if he wore a cowl he would be able to give a good account of himself.

Frau Esch had stiffened into expressionless gravity. She mechanically patted her hair to rights and said at last:

"Is the soup good, Herr Huguenau?"

"Splendid," said Huguenau, supping it up.

"Would you like another plateful?" Frau Esch sighed. "I've nothing very grand to follow to-day in any case, only a tart."

She nodded in satisfaction when he let his plate be filled again. But meanwhile Huguenau stuck to his theme: apparently Herr Esch was already sick of the war rations; there were no meat and flour cards in the monasteries, one could still live there as if it were peace-time; but considering how much land the priests owned that wasn't surprising. They still stuffed their bellies full in these places. When he was in Maulbronn

an employee of the monastery had told him …

Esch interrupted him: if the world became really free again, there would be no need for anyone to eat prison fare.…

“Turnips and cabbages,” said Frau Esch.

“But not fresh cabbage,” said Huguenau, “what do you call being really free?”

Esch said:

“The freedom of a Christian soul.”

“By all means,” said Huguenau, “but I would like to know what that has to do with cabbage.”

Esch seized the Bible:

“My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of murderers.”

“Hm, and murderers are given stale cabbage,” grinned Huguenau; then he became serious: “So you think the war is a kind of murder, murder with robbery in a way, as the Socialists say.”

Esch paid no attention to him; he went on turning over the leaves:

“And besides it’s stated in Chronicles second book … sixth chapter, eighth verse … here it is: ‘ Forasmuch as it was in thine heart to build an house for my name, thou didst well in that it was in thine heart: Notwithstanding thou shalt not build the house; but thy son which shall come forth out of thy loins, he shall build the house for my name.’ ” Esch’s face had grown red: “That’s a very important passage.”

“It may be,” said Huguenau, “but why?”

“Murder and counter-murder … many must sacrifice themselves that the Redeemer may be born, the son who shall build the house.”

Huguenau asked cautiously:

“Do you mean the future Socialist State?”

“Trade unions alone can’t do it.”

“I see … that’s from the Major’s article, I suppose?”

“No, that’s in the Bible, only nobody has gathered its meaning yet.”

Huguenau threatened Esch with an upraised finger:

“You’re a sly dog, Esch … and you fancy that the old Major will never notice what you’re up to now under cover of the Bible?”

“What’s that?”

“Why, communistic propaganda.”

Esch grinned, showing his strong yellow teeth:

“You’re an idiot.”

“It’s easy to be rude … what’s your idea of the future state, then?” Esch thought hard:

“It’s impossible to make you understand anything … but one thing I can tell you: when people begin again to understand how to read the Bible, then there won’t be any more need of Communism or Socialism … and there won’t be any French Republic or German Emperor either.”

“Well, but that’s plain revolution … just tell that to the Major.”

“I’d tell him, too, without any hesitation.”

“He’ll be delighted to hear it, no doubt … and what will happen next, after you’ve got rid of the Emperor?”

Esch said:

“The Redeemer will reign over all men.”

Huguenau winked across at Frau Esch:

“Your son, do you mean?”

Esch too gazed at his wife: it looked almost as if he were startled:

“My son?”

“We have no children,” said Frau Esch.

“But you said that your son would build the house,” Huguenau grinned.

That, however, was too much for Esch:

“You’re blaspheming, sir … you’re so dense that you can’t help blaspheming or twisting one’s words.…”

“He doesn’t mean it like that,” said Frau Esch appeasingly, “the food will grow quite cold if you two quarrel.”

Esch sat in silence and accepted his portion of tart.

“Oh, I’ve often sat at table with a silent parson,” said Huguenau.

Esch still made no reply, and Huguenau challenged him again:

“Well, what about this reign of the Redeemer, then?”

Frau Esch assumed an expectant look:

“Tell him.”

"It's a symbol," growled Esch.

"Interesting," said Huguenau, "do you mean the priests are to reign?"

"God in Heaven … it's hopeless to get anything into your head … the sovereignty of the Church is something you never heard of, I suppose … and yet you call yourself an editor."

Now Huguenau on his side was honestly indignant:

"So that's what your communism is … if that's what it really is … you want to hand everything over to the priests. That's why you want to go into a monastery … so that the priests may live still better … then there won't be even stale cabbage for us … to throw the hard-earned money of this company into the maw of these gentry … no, I much prefer my honest business to your communism in that case."

"Devil take it, then go about your business! but if you refuse to learn anything you shouldn't persist in wanting to run a paper with your narrow-minded—yes, I repeat, narrow-minded views. It can't be done."

Whereupon Huguenau triumphantly retorted that Esch should be jolly glad to have found him; the advertising side of the paper, as a certain Herr Esch had run it, would have brought the *Herald* to ruin within a year, anybody could prove that in his sleep. And he blinked expectantly at Frau Esch, assuming that she would give him support on this practical question. But Frau Esch was clearing the table and seemed in a softened mood: once more Huguenau was forced to note with disapproval that she had laid her hand on her husband's shoulder; she did not listen to what was said, but simply stated that there were things which you and me, dear Herr Huguenau, find it difficult to grasp. And Esch, rising from the table in apotheosis, closed the discussion:

"You must learn, young man; learn to open your eyes."

Huguenau left the room. Priests' gabble, he thought. *Haïssez les ennemis de la sainte religion.* Oh, yes, merde, blagueurs, he was willing enough to hate, but he refused to have it laid down for him whom he was to hate. D'ailleurs je m'en fous. The clattering sound of washed plates and the stale smell of dishwater accompanied him down the wooden stairs and reminded him with strange vividness of his parents' house and his mother in her kitchen.

CHAPTER XLVI

A few days later the following epistle flowed from Huguenau's pen:

To the Town Commandant Major Joachim von Pasenow. *Local Secret Report No.* 1.

Most esteemed Herr Major,

With reference to the conversation which I was privileged to have with you regarding above, I respectfully beg to report that I was present yesterday at a meeting between the said Herr Esch and several suspicious elements. As already mentioned, Herr Esch meets certain subversive elements several times every week in the Palatine Tavern, and yesterday he kindly invited me to accompany him. In addition to a foreman in the paper factory, a certain Liebel, there were present a worker in the aforesaid factory whose name was uttered with intentional indistinctness so that I did not catch it, also two inmates of the military hospital who had been given leave to go out—viz.: a corporal of the name of Bauer and an artilleryman with a Polish name. Somewhat later there arrived a volunteer belonging to a bomb-throwing section. He was called Betge, Betzge, or something resembling that, and was addressed by the aforesaid Herr E. as "Herr Doctor." The conversation soon switched on to the war even without my suggesting it, and a great deal was said especially about the possibility of the war ending. The aforesaid volunteer in particular asserted that the war was nearing its end, because the Austrians were slackening. He had heard from some of our allies passing through in an armoured train that a great munition factory near Vienna had been blown into the air by Italian fliers or by treachery, and that the Austrian fleet had gone over to the enemy after murdering their officers, and that they were only prevented from doing this by German submarines. The artilleryman replied that he could not believe this, because the German sailors too were sick of the war. When asked by me who had informed him of that he said that he had learned it from a girl in the town brothel, who had been told it by a naval paymaster here on leave. After the glorious Skagerrak sea-fight she said, as reported afterwards by the artilleryman, the sailors had refused to obey further orders, claiming also that the men's food was bad. Every one agreed thereupon that an end must be made of the war. In this connection the works foreman maintained that the war brought profit to nobody except the big capitalists, and that the Russians had been the first to recognize this. These subversive ideas were also advocated by E., who drew his support in doing so from the Bible, but from my experiences with Herr E., I think I can say with certainty that he is pursuing hypocritical ends by such means, and that the properties of the Church are a thorn in his flesh. Obviously to serve as a cloak for the plot that is being hatched, he proposed that a Bible Society should be founded, but all the same

this was greeted with scorn by most of those present. So as to learn more of him on the one hand, and of the paymaster on the other, we visited the brothel at my suggestion after the two inmates of the hospital and the factory worker had left. I could not gather much information, however, about the paymaster at the brothel, but on the other hand the conduct of Herr E. seemed more and more suspicious to me. For the "Doctor," who beyond doubt is a regular customer of the house, introduced me with the words: "This is a gentleman from the Government, you must treat him gratis," from which I deduced that E. had certain suspicions regarding me, and accordingly had warned his accomplices to be cautious in my presence. Consequently I was unsuccessful in my attempt to induce Herr E. to drop his reserve, and although he drank a great deal at my invitation and my expense, he refused in spite of every encouragement to go upstairs, but remained apparently quite sober, which state he employed to make noisy harangues in the waiting-room on the un-Christian and blasphemous nature of such establishments. Only when the volunteer "Doctor" explained to him that these houses were allotted to the army on sanitary grounds by the military authorities, and consequently must be regarded as military institutions, did he give up his antagonistic standpoint, which he once more took up, however, on the way home.

As I have nothing further to report to-day, I beg to send you my profoundest respects and to declare myself eagerly willing for further service.

Yours respectfully,

WILH. HUGUENAU.

P.S.—*I beg respectfully to add that during our conversation in the Palatine Tavern Herr Esch made mention of the fact that in the prison in this town one or more deserters are lying at present, preparatory to their being shot. Thereupon everyone, including Herr Esch, loudly expressed the opinion that there was no object in shooting deserters now that the war is nearing its end (which these people seem to count on), seeing that enough blood had already been shed without that. Herr Esch was of the opinion that steps should be taken for this purpose. Whether by this he meant violent or other steps he did not say. I should like once more to respectfully insist that I consider the said E. as a wolf in sheep's clothing, who conceals his subversive aims behind pious phrases. Once more with profoundest respects*,

W. H.

After concluding this report Huguenau gazed into the mirror to see whether he could bring off an ironical grimace like that which had so often exasperated him in Esch. Yes, his letter was a masterly achievement; it did one good to put a spoke in Esch's wheel, and Huguenau was so delighted with this pleasant thought that he could not help picturing the satisfaction which the Major would feel on receiving the letter. He considered whether he should deliver it personally, but then it seemed more fitting to him that it should reach the Major's hands by the official postal delivery. So he sent it by registered post, not however without first writing in huge letters on the envelope "Personal," and underlining it thrice.

Huguenau had deceived himself, however; the Major was by no means pleased when he found the letter among the correspondence lying on his desk. It was a dull thundery morning, the rain poured down the window panes of his office and the air smelt of sulphur or of soot. Something ugly and violent was concealed behind this letter, something subterranean, and even though the Major did not know, and even though it was not his duty to know, that there must always be violence and violation when one man tries to force his way into the reality of others and to graft his own on to it, yet the word "Night-birds" came into his mind, and it seemed to him that he was called upon to protect himself, to protect his wife and children from something which was not of his world, but belonged to the pit. Hesitatingly he took up the letter again; at bottom one could not blame this man, whose violence was only, so to speak, an insignificant kind of violence, who merely fulfilled his duty as a patriot and made his report, and if he did it in the loathsome and dishonourable manner of an *agent provocateur*, yet one could not take that amiss in an uneducated man. Yet because all this was really incomprehensible and beyond his grasp, the Major felt only a rush of shame at having reposed confidence in a man of low mind, and his face under his white hair became a little redder with shame. Nevertheless the Town Commandant could not consider himself justified in simply relegating the communication to the wastepaper-basket; rather did his office oblige him to continue to regard the suspicious Herr Esch with due mistrust, to keep watch on him, so to speak, from the distance, so that any danger that might possibly threaten the Fatherland from Herr Esch's activities might be prevented.

CHAPTER XLVII

Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck rang up Dr Kessel on the telephone:

“Can you come at three this afternoon to operate, a small bullet extraction …?”

Dr Kessel thought he could hardly manage it, his time was so taken up.

“Too simple for you, I suppose, fishing out a bullet, for me too … but one mustn’t ask too much … this isn’t a life or the type of work a man can stand for long, I admit, and I’ll throw it up some day or other, too … but to-day there’s no help for it.… I order you to come. I’ll send a car for you, it won’t take longer than half-an-hour.”

Kühlenbeck put back the receiver and laughed:

“Well, that’s two hours of his time accounted for.”

Flurschütz was sitting beside him:

“I had been wondering, I must admit, why you asked Kessel to come for such a trifle.”

“Poor old Kessel is always trying to give me the slip. We’ll take out Kneese’s appendix at the same time.”

“You really intend to operate on him?”

“Why not? The man must be allowed his pleasures … and me too.”

“Why, does he want to be operated on?”

“Come, Flurschütz, you’re becoming as naive as our old friend Kessel—have I ever asked anybody that? Afterwards they were all thankful enough. And the four weeks’ sick-leave that I get for every one of them … well, just think for yourself.”

Flurschütz made to say something. Kühlenbeck put up his hand:

“Oh, leave me in peace with your secretion theories … my dear chap, if I can look into a man’s belly I have no need of theories … follow my example and become a surgeon … the only way of keeping young.”

“And am I to throw up all the work I’ve done on glands?”

“Throw it up with a good conscience … you operate quite neatly as it is.”

“Something must be done about Jaretzki, sir … the man’s going to pieces.”

“Suppose we try a trepanning operation on him.”

“But you’ve already discharged him … with his nerves in the condition they’re in he should be sent to a special institution.”

“I’ve reported him for Kreuznach, he’ll soon pull himself together there.… You’re a fine generation! a little boozing and you break down and must be sent to an institute for neurotics.… Orderly!”

The orderly appeared in the doorway.

“Tell Sister Carla that we shall operate at three … oh yes, and Murwitz in room two and Kneese in room three are to be given nothing to eat to-day … that’s all … what do you say, Flurschütz, we won’t really need poor old Kessel, we’ll manage quite nicely by ourselves … it’s hardly worth while calling in Kessel, he only complains that his legs are paining him: real sadism of me to drag him out … well, what do you say, Flurschütz?”

“With all respect, sir, I can act for Kessel this time, but this can’t go on indefinitely … and then it won’t be possible any longer simply to order a medical man to operate.”

“Insubordination, Flurschütz?”

“Merely theoretical, sir … yes, it seems to me that in no very long time medicine will have specialized itself so completely that a consultation between a physician and a surgeon or a dermatologist will lead to no result at all, simply because there will be no means of making one specialist understand another.”

“Wrong, quite wrong, Flurschütz, very shortly there will be nothing but surgery … that’s the only thing that will be left of this whole wretched art of medicine … man is a butcher and whatever he may do he remains a butcher, he can’t understand anything else … but he understands that to a T.” And Dr Kühlenbeck regarded his great hairy skilful hands with the nails cut quite short.

Then he said reflectively:

“Do you know, a man who refused to come to terms with that fact might actually go off his head … one must take the matter as it is and get what pleasure one can out of it … so be advised, Flurschütz, swop horses and become a surgeon.”

CHAPTER XLVIII

One had to fight for every bale of paper that one asked to be delivered, and although Esch was furnished with a certificate from the authorities empowering him to receive the supply required by the *Kur-Trier Herald*, he had to go out to the paper factory every week. And almost every time there was a row with old Herr Keller or the factory manager.

The men were just leaving for the day when Esch left the factory. He overtook the foreman Liebel and the mechanic Fendrich on the road. He really couldn’t stand Liebel, with his fair-haired conical head and the thick vein across his brow. He said:

“ ’Evening.”

“ ’Evening, Esch, have you been praying all this time with the old man?”

Esch did not understand.

“Why, to get him to deliver your paper.”

“Bloody nonsense,” said Esch.

Fendrich stopped and showed the soles of his shoes; they were in holes:

“That’ll cost six marks … that’s how your rises in wages go.”

This provided Esch with a starting-point:

“You can’t do much by simply raising your wages, that’s the mistake all the unions make.”

“What’s this, Esch? Are you thinking of mending Fendrich’s boots with the Bible too?”

“Bloody nonsense,” repeated Esch.

Fendrich’s eyes glowed feverishly in their dark cavities; he was tuberculous and could not get enough milk to drink. He said:

“Religion too is probably a luxury that only the rich people can afford.”

Liebel said:

“Majors and newspaper editors.”

Esch said somewhat apologetically:

“I’m only an employee of the paper, like yourself,” then he flared up, “besides that’s all nonsense, as if the unions had ever taken the vow of poverty!”

Fendrich said:

“It would be all very fine if one could believe.”

Esch said:

“I’ve discovered something: religion has to renew itself too, and get a new life … it says in the Bible that only the son can build the house.”

Liebel said:

“Of course the next generation will have a better time, that isn’t news to me.… I simply can’t live now on my hundred and forty marks, even reckoning in the bonus … the old man won’t admit that … and I’m supposed to be foreman, too.”

“I haven’t any more than that myself,” said Esch, “counting in the house and all.… I’ve two tenants, but I can’t decently ask anything from them, poor devils … my rent account is passive.”

The evening wind freshened. Fendrich coughed.

Liebel said:

“Well? Any news?”

Esch admitted:

“I’ve been seeing the priest.…”

“What for?”

“About that passage in the Bible, the idiot didn’t even listen … mumbled something about prayer and the Church, and that was all. The bloody priest … one must help oneself.”

“That’s right,” said Fendrich, “nobody helps you.”

Liebel said:

“If you stick together, you help one another … that’s the advantage of the unions.”

“The doctor says I must go to the mountains, and he’s applied ten times already to the sick-fund … but if you don’t come from the Front you’ve got to want, these days, and my cough just goes on and on.”

Esch put on his ironical expression:

“With your unions and your sick-funds you won’t get much further on than me with my priests.…”

“You have to die by yourself,” said Fendrich, coughing.

Liebel asked:

“What really are you after?”

Esch considered:

“I used to think that one only had to clear out … to America … across the wide ocean on a ship … so as to begin a new life … but now …”

Liebel waited for the end of the sentence:

“And now?”

But Esch answered unexpectedly:

“Perhaps the Protestants are nearer it … the Major is a Protestant after all … but one must think the matter over first oneself … one must get together with other people and read the Bible to get some clear light … when one’s alone, one keeps on doubting, no matter how much one broods on the subject.”

“When one has friends, everything’s easier,” said Fendrich.

“You come and see me,” said Esch, “I’ll show you the passage in the Bible.”
“All right,” said Fendrich.
“And what about you, Liebel?” Esch felt obliged to ask.
“You must tell me first what you’ve concocted together.”
Fendrich sighed:
“Everybody can only see things through his own eyes.”
Liebel laughed and went away.
“He’ll come yet, all right,” said Esch.

CHAPTER XLIX

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (7)

My memory has not retained much of the evening that I spent with Nuchem Sussin at the Salvation Army meeting. I was occupied with more important things. No matter how one may estimate philosophical activity, it has at any rate the effect of making the external world insignificant and less worthy of notice. And apart from that even the most noteworthy things escape one’s notice while one is experiencing them. In short, all that I can remember is Nuchem Sussin walking along beside me with his grey frock-coat buttoned up, his trousers flapping about his legs, they were so short, and his absurdly small velour hat perched on his head. All these Jews, when they’re not rigged out in black caps, wear those velour hats that are too small for them, even the ostensibly fashionable Dr Litwak does this, and I could not forbear asking Nuchem the rude question where he had got that hat of his. “I just got it,” was the answer.

Besides, the whole affair was not worth mentioning. It took on some colour of importance only because of Dr Litwak, who came in to see me yesterday. He has the unpleasant habit of simply walking in on me; he did the same thing on the occasion of my so-called illness. So he appeared before me again as I lay on the chaise-longue; he had the indispensable walking-stick in his hand and the absurd little velour hat on his head. That is to say, the hat itself was by no means small, it had a broad brim, but it sat on the very top of his skull without covering it. It occurred to me at that moment that Dr Litwak too must have had a milk-white complexion in his youth. Now it reminded one unquestionably of yellow cream.

“You will be able to tell me about Sussin.”

I said, because it conformed with the truth:

“He is my friend.”

“Friend, very good …” Dr Litwak pulled over a chair for himself, “his people are anxious, they asked me to come … you understand?”

In reality I was under no obligation to understand him, but I wanted to shorten the proceedings:

“He has a right to go where he likes.”

“Oh, who has the right, who hasn’t the right.… I’m not reproaching you of course … but why is he running about with this goy girl?”

It dawned on me only then that on that evening I had asked Marie and Nuchem into my room. People who haven’t money can’t sit about in restaurants.

I could not help laughing.

“You laugh, and his wife is sitting up there crying.”

Well, that was certainly news to me; all the same I might have remembered that these Jews get married at fifteen. If I had only known which was Nuchem’s wife: one of the stylish girls? or one of the matrons with their hair parted in the middle? the latter seemed the more probable.

I held Dr Litwak by the cord of his eyeglasses:

“Has he children as well?”

“Why, what do you expect him to have? Kittens?”

Dr Litwak put on such an indignant expression that I had to ask him what his first name was.

“Dr Samson Litwak,” he introduced himself anew.

“Well then look here, Dr Samson, what do you really want of me?”

He reflected for a while:

“I’m an enlightened man … but this is going too far … you must stop him.”

“Stop him from what? from wanting to go to Zion? Leave him that harmless pleasure.”

“He’ll get himself baptized yet … you must stop him.”

“But whether he reaches Jerusalem as a Jew or a Christian is surely a bagatelle.”

“Jerusalem,” he repeated, as if a bonbon had been put into his mouth.

“Well, then,” said I, hoping that he would retire now.

He was still obviously rolling the name on his tongue:

"I'm an enlightened man … but nobody ever got there by singing songs and beating drums … that's for a different kind of people.… I must visit everybody, I'm a doctor, it needn't matter to me whether one is a Jew or a Christian … there's decent people everywhere, will you stop him?"

This persistence got on my nerves:

"I'm a great Anti-Semite," he smiled incredulously, "I'm an agent of the Salvation Army, I'm quartermaster in Jerusalem."

"A joke," he said appreciatively, although he was visibly disconcerted, "a joke, *nebbich.*"

There he was certainly right; a joke, *nebbich*, that was for the time being the attitude to life into which I had fallen. What could be held responsible for it? The war? I did not know, and probably do not know even to-day, although many things have changed since.

I still held Dr Litwak by the cord of his eyeglasses. He said:

"But you're an enlightened man too.…"

"Well?"

"Why don't you leave people their …" he brought out the word only with difficulty, "… their prejudices?"

"So, you call such things prejudices!"

Now he was quite thrown into confusion.

"They're not really prejudices of course … what do you mean by prejudices?…" and finally becoming calm again: "but in reality they're not prejudices."

When he had gone I went over in my mind that evening of the Salvation Army meeting. As I have said, it had passed without making the slightest impression on me. Now and then I had regarded Nuchem Sussin as he sat there with a somewhat lifeless smile round the curved Jewish lips in his milk-white face, listening to the singing. And then I had asked them both up to my room, or more correctly Marie only, for Nuchem of course lived in the house,—well, and then they had both sat in my room silently listening while I talked. Until Nuchem once more pointed to the lute and said: "Play something." Then Marie had taken the lute and sung: "We're marching on to Zion's gate, A host so great and true, All cleansed in the Redeemer's blood, And there is room for you." And Nuchem listened with a somewhat lifeless smile.

CHAPTER L

Huguenau waited for eight days, expecting some sign of approval or at least a reply from the Major. He waited for ten days. Then he became uneasy. The report had obviously not come up to the Major's expectations. But was it his fault that that cretin Esch provided him with no material? Huguenau considered whether he should follow up the first report with a second, but what was he to say in it? That Esch was colloguing as usual with the vine-growers and the factory workers was nothing new; that would only bore the Major!

The Major mustn't be bored—Huguenau racked his brains to find some proposal to lay before the Major. Something simply must be done; Esch reigned supreme in the office and acted as though the real editor of the paper were non-existent, and in the printing-shed everything was dreary beyond endurance. Huguenau looked through the great newspapers for stimulation, and found it when he made the discovery that all these journals were labouring in the service of national charities, while the *Kur-Trier Herald* had undertaken nothing, absolutely nothing at all. So that was what Herr Esch's warmth of heart amounted to, that warmth of heart which could not endure the spectacle of the misery among the vine-growers. But as for himself he knew now what to do.

On Friday evening, after a long absence, he appeared again at the hotel and proceeded at once to the room where the notabilities sat, for that was his place by right. The Major was sitting at his table in the outer dining-room, and Huguenau greeted him formally and curtly in passing.

By good luck the gentlemen were already there in force, and Huguenau announced that he was glad to find so many of them, for he had an important matter to discuss, and at once, before the Major came in. And in a fairly long speech he pointed out that the town lacked, painfully lacked, any proper charitable organization such as had already existed for years almost everywhere else for the alleviation of hardships caused by the war, and he moved that such an organization should be established at once. As for its objects, he would content himself with mentioning, among other things, the preservation of soldiers' graves, the provision for soldiers' widows and orphans and so on; further, he would like to point out that the money for these lofty objects must be raised, and that in this connection an "Iron Bismarck,"[1] for instance, could be erected in the market-place, nails at ten pfennigs per nail, besides it was a crying scandal that this town alone should lack such a monument—and finally that charitable appeals of various kinds, not to speak of public collections, would always help to increase their funds. And that this organization, for which he

begged to suggest the title of “The Moselle Memorial Association” should appear under the patronage of the Town Commandant. He himself and his paper—of course within the limits of their modest powers—stood at all times and free of cost at the disposal of the association and its lofty aims.

It need scarcely be said, of course, that the proposal was greeted with universal applause and was accepted unanimously and without discussion. Huguenau and Herr Paulsen the chemist were nominated as delegates to convey the proposal to the Herr Major, and smoothing down their coats they strode with a certain solemnity into the dining-room.

The Major looked up with some surprise, then he drew himself up with a little jerk as though on parade and listened attentively but without understanding to the phrases of the two gentlemen. These phrases crossed one another and raced one another, and the Major heard something about an Iron Bismarck and war widows and a “Moselle Memorial” and did not understand. At last Huguenau was intelligent enough to resign all speech to the chemist; it seemed to him also that that was the more modest course, and so he sat still and regarded the clock on the wall, the picture of *The Crown-Prince Friedrich after the Battle of Gravelotte*, and the Spatenbräu sign (with the spade) which hung on a cord beside the picture of the Crown-Prince. Where could one get Spatenbräu now! Meanwhile the Major had grasped what Paulsen was saying: he thought, he said, that there were no military grounds against his acceptance, he welcomed this patriotic proposal, he could only thank them most cordially, and he rose in order to convey his thanks to the gentlemen in the next room. Paulsen and Huguenau followed, proud of their accomplished achievement.

They sat for a long time together, for it was in a sense an inaugural celebration. Huguenau waited for an opportunity to get hold of the Major, and it came presently when they drank to the health and success of the new association and its patron, not forgetting, of course, the man who had originated the splendid idea, Herr Huguenau.

Huguenau, his glass in his hand, went the round of the table and in this manner reached Major von Pasenow:

“I hope Herr Major is satisfied with me to-night.”

He had never had any cause for dissatisfaction, replied the Major.

“Come, Herr Major, my report seems to have rather missed fire … but I hope you’ll take into consideration that the circumstances were very difficult. And then I have been working early and late reorganizing the paper; I hope you will not set it down to negligence that I haven’t been able to send you a second report.…”

The Major said firmly:

“I think it is scarcely worth while pursuing the matter any further; you have done already all that you were in duty bound to do.”

Huguenau was taken aback.

“Oh, not at all, not at all,” he muttered, and assured the Major that he would take up his work of surveillance really in earnest now.

As the Major made no reply to this, Huguenau went on:

“We’ll print the appeal for ‘The Moselle Memorial’ at once, to-morrow … in honour of the occasion will not the Herr Major pay our concern the honour of a visit, after so graciously standing godfather to it … that would be the most splendid propaganda for the new association.”

The Major replied that he would be only too delighted to pay the *Kur-Trier Herald* a visit; for the next day, however, all his arrangements were already made, but he presumed any day would suit equally.

“The earlier the better, Herr Major,” Huguenau ventured. “The Herr Major won’t find anything very remarkable to inspect … everything quite modest … and of course there aren’t many outward signs of the work that has been put into reorganizing it, but I can say with all modesty that the printing arrangements are in perfect order …”

Suddenly he had a new idea:

“The printing-press, for instance, would do splendidly for any printing required by the military authorities,” he caught fire, he would have liked to seize the Major by the coat-button. “You see, Herr Major, you see how Esch has neglected the business … it needed me to hit on that idea. We must get the custom of the army authorities, now that the paper is, so to speak, under your direct patronage, and we have put so much money into it … how else am I to squeeze a dividend out of it for the shareholders … considering the state I found the business in?” he said in despair, and he felt honestly embittered.

The Major replied somewhat helplessly:

“But that isn’t my province …”

“Quite, quite, Herr Major, but if the Herr Major seriously desired it … and once the Herr Major has seen the printing-office, he will certainly desire it.…”

He gazed at the Major alluringly and seductively and despairingly all in one. But then he pulled himself up, wiped his glasses, and cast a glance round the table: “It is obviously in the interests of all the gentlemen sitting here too … all you gentlemen are invited to inspect the place, of course that’s understood.”

But most of them knew Esch’s den already. Only they did not say so.

[1]A wooden statue, into which the public were encouraged to hammer nails until the wood was covered.

CHAPTER LI

Since Heinrich Wendling had announced that he was coming home on leave, more than three weeks had passed. And although she still lay long in bed of mornings, Hanna scarcely believed now that Heinrich would really come. He suddenly arrived, however, neither in the evening, nor in the morning, but in the broad light of day. He had spent half the night in Coblenz station, and then had come on with a dawdling transport train. And as he was telling her this they stood opposite each other on the paved garden-path; the noonday sun shone down, and in the middle of the lawn a red garden-umbrella glowed warmly beside the camp-chair on which she had been lying; they could smell the hot, red cotton, and the leaves of her book, which had slipped down, fluttered in the light wind. Heinrich did not touch her, he had not even reached out his hand to her, but stared immovably in her face, and she, knowing that he must be searching for a picture which he had carried in his mind for more than two years, kept quite still under his searching glance; and she too looked into the face turned towards her, seeking in her turn not, indeed, for a picture she had harboured, for there was no longer any picture in her mind, but for the traits because of which she had once been compulsively drawn to love that face. Strangely unaltered that face seemed to her now, she knew and recognized again the line of the lips; the arrangement and shape of the teeth, the dimple on the chin had remained unchanged, and the space between the eyes was a little too wide on account of the breadth of the skull. “I must see your profile,” she said and he turned his head obediently. And it was the same straight nose and long upper lip that she saw again, only every trace of softness had vanished, that was all. One had really to acknowledge that he was a handsome man, yet she did not find what had once so intensely delighted and attracted her. Heinrich asked: “Where’s the boy?” “He’s at school … won’t you come in?” They went into the house. Yet even now he still did not touch her, still did not kiss her, but simply gazed at her. “I must have a thorough wash first of all … haven’t had a bath since leaving Vienna.”

“Yes, we’ll turn on a bath.”

The two maids appeared to bid the master welcome. Hanna did not quite like that. She went up with him to the bathroom, and herself laid out the bath towels.

“Everything’s still in its old place, Heinrich.”

“Oh, everything’s still in its old place?”

She left the bathroom; there were all sorts of things to arrange and rearrange; she attended to them wearily.

She cut roses in the garden for the dinner-table.

After a while she returned softly to the bathroom door and listened to the splashing inside. She could feel her usual headache coming on. Supporting herself on the banister she descended once more to the hall.

At last the boy returned from school. She took him by the hand. At the bathroom door she cried: “May we come in now?” “Of course,” the reply came in a somewhat astonished voice. She opened the door a little, and peeped in through the opening: Heinrich was standing half dressed before the mirror, and she thrust one of the roses into the unwillingly opened hand of the child, pushed him in and ran away.

She waited for the two of them in the dining-room, and could not help averting her eyes when they entered. They looked absurdly alike, with the same eyes set wide apart, the same movements, the same crop of brown hair, except that Heinrich wore his quite short now. It was as though she had had no share at all in the child. A terrible mechanism; oh, it was terrible to have been loved. And at that moment her life seemed to her like one long imbecility, a despairing imbecility, which nevertheless she would never be able to change.

Heinrich said: “Home again” and sat down at his old place. Perhaps his words seemed stupid to him; he smiled uncertainly. The boy regarded him attentively and distantly.

There he sat, the father of the family, and spoilt everything.

The maid too could not keep her eyes off him; there was a hint of admiration and envy in her glance; and when she entered again Hanna said very distinctly:

“Should I telephone to Röders … about this evening?”

The advocate Röders was Wendling’s colleague in the office; he was over fifty and exempt from military service.

The English clock in its mahogany case struck a deep gong-like stroke.

With her little finger Hanna lightly touched the back of Heinrich's hand, as though by the caress she were begging forgiveness for thinking of spending the evening with Röders, but warning him at the same time that she desired to avoid physical contacts.

Heinrich said:

"Of course, I'll have to ring up Röders … I'll fix it up, then."

Hanna said:

"We'll go out walking with papa in the afternoon and show ourselves."

"Yes, let's do that," said Heinrich.

"Isn't it lovely to have papa sitting here with us again?"

"Yes," said the boy after some hesitation.

"You must look over his school books … he can write and count already. He wrote his letters to you quite by himself."

"They were splendid letters, Walter."

"They were only postcards," said Walter shyly.

That they were appealing to the child between them, so as to find each other across his brown head, seemed to them both like an abuse of the child. Certainly it would have been more honest to say: we will not kiss each other until our longing has become intolerable. But that longing was not really longing, it was only intolerable expectation.

They went up to the nursery, on whose panelled walls a childish fresco, intentionally gay, was painted. And with that second and clearer and somewhat wry intelligence which can arise from intensified expectation or from an agonizing headache, Hanna knew that all these lacquered furnishings and all this whiteness was also an abuse of the child, knew that it had nothing to do with his own life and nature, but that a symbol had been set up in this room, a symbol of her white breasts and of the white milk which they would produce after successful embraces. It was a very remote and very vague thought, and yet in it lay the reason why she had never been able to stay long in the nursery and had preferred that the boy should come to her. She said: "You must show papa your new toys too." Walter brought the new box of bricks and the soldiers in field-grey. There were twenty-three men and an officer, who with one knee bent waved his drawn sword towards the enemy. None of the three noticed that Dr Heinrich Wendling also wore the field-grey uniform of an officer; each, it is true, had a different motive for not noticing it: Walter, because he felt that his father was an intruder, Heinrich, because it was impossible for him to identify the heroic gestures of the tin soldiers with real war, Hanna because, to her own horror, she suddenly saw this man naked before her, naked, and isolated in his nakedness. It was the same isolation as she had remarked in the pieces of furniture about her, that stood as though naked, with no connection with their surroundings, no relation to each other, strange and disturbing.

He too could not but feel it. And when they went out walking they took the child between them, and although Hanna held the boy's hand and swung it gaily, and Heinrich often took the other hand, he was a barrier separating them. They did not look at each other, they were embarrassed, as if ashamed, they gazed straight ahead or at the fields where dandelions and purple clover, wild pinks and lilac scabious, were growing in the grass. The day was warm and Hanna was not used to walking in the afternoon. Yet it was not solely the heat that made her feel such an urgent need for a bath when she returned; every wish of hers now reached down in the most curious way to a deeper stratum of consciousness: it was as though the immersion of her body in the water would spread a great solitude around her, as if she had visions of that magical rebirth which one experiences in the isolation of the water. More definite, certainly, than these thoughts was her repugnance at the idea of visiting the bathroom at bedtime in Heinrich's presence. On the other hand the maid would think it queer if she were to take a bath in the middle of the day, and on the pretext that she had to change for the evening she asked Heinrich if he would order a car meanwhile and look after Walter. Then she went to the bathroom, intending to have a shower-bath at least. But when she got into the tub, to which a few drops from the midday bath still clung, for the douche was dripping, her knees grew weak and she had to let the cold water run over her until her skin was like glass and the points of her breasts grew quite hard. After that it was more endurable.

It was late when they drove over to Röders'; Heinrich dismissed the car since it was such a lovely evening, and Hanna was thankful for the suggestion that they should walk home—the later that happened, the better. And it was actually midnight when they left Röders! But when they were crossing the silent market-place on which nobody was to be seen except the sentry on duty at military headquarters, when the empty place surrounded by the dark houses, in which scarcely a light was burning, lay before them like a crater of isolation, like a crater of silence out of which recurring waves of peace flowed over the sleeping town, then Heinrich Wendling took his wife's arm, and at that first physical contact she closed her eyes.

Perhaps he too had closed his eyes and saw neither the deep summer night sky nor the white ribbon of the road that stretched in front of them as they walked in its dust, perhaps each of them saw a different firmament, both of them sealed like their eyes, each in a separate isolation, and yet united in the renewed knowledge of their bodies, which yielded at last to a kiss; and the veils dropped from their faces, that were lascivious in the consciousness of sex, yet chaste in the pain of a separation that could never end, that could never be abolished again no matter how tender they were with each other.

CHAPTER LII

After Samwald's funeral Gödicke of the Landwehr began to speak.

Samwald, a volunteer, was the brother of Friedrich Samwald the watchmaker, who had a shop in Römerstrasse. After a mass attack accompanied by a heavy bombardment, young Samwald had suddenly begun to cough and collapsed. He was a nice brave lad of nineteen, everybody liked him, and so he had managed to get sent to the hospital of his native town. He did not arrive even in a hospital transport, but alone, like a man on leave, and Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck said: "Well, as for you, my lad, we'll soon put you to rights." And although Dr Kessel never came to the hospital without looking up young Samwald, and although Samwald seemed quite restored to health, he was suddenly seized with another hæmorrhage and in three days he was dead. In spite of the brilliant sun smiling down from the sky.

Since the hospital was one only for light cases, death was not hushed up there as in larger hospitals. On the contrary it was treated as a solemn event. Before the coffin was borne to the cemetery it was laid on the bier in front of the entrance to the hospital, and there consecrated. Those patients who were not confined to bed put on their uniforms and formed up in order, and there were a good many people from the town. The Surgeon-Major pronounced a stirring eulogy, the priest stood beside the coffin, a boy in a red soutane with a white tunic swung the censer. Then the women knelt, many of the men too, and once more they told over their rosaries.

Gödicke had remained in the hospital garden. When he noticed the crowd assembling he hobbled up on his two sticks and joined it. The spectacle he now saw was familiar to him, and consequently he refused to countenance it. He thought deeply; he wanted to destroy what he saw, to tear it to bits as one tears to bits a piece of paper or cardboard—and how that was to be done had to be vigilantly and keenly thought out. When the women plumped down on their knees like charwomen, a laugh rose into his throat, but he dared not make a sound, that was forbidden him. Supported on his two sticks, he stood in the midst of the kneeling women, he stood there like a scaffolding, and rammed his supports into the ground and pressed the sound back into his throat. But now the women had finished their Paternoster and their three Aves and came to the passage, "descended into Hell, and rose again from the dead on the third day"; then—it seemed in a lower storey of the scaffolding, and as though spoken by a ventriloquist he had once heard—words began to form just above his tortured and compressed abdomen, and instead of roaring them out, so reluctantly did the words emerge that it was perhaps inaudibly that the bricklayer Gödricke said: "Arisen from the dead," and immediately fell silent again, so terrified was he at what had taken place in the lower storey of his scaffolding. No one was regarding him; they had raised the coffin; the coffin with the crucifix fastened to it swayed on the bearers' shoulders; the watchmaker Samwald, small and a little bent, fell in with the other relatives behind the bearers; then followed the doctors; then came the rest of the procession. Last of all hobbled the bricklayer Gödicke on his sticks, wearing his hospital overall.

Sister Mathilde caught sight of him as they were going along the boulevard. She made straight for him: "But, Gödicke, you can't come like this … what are you thinking about, in your overall …" but he paid no attention to her. Even when she fetched the Surgeon-Major to support her he refused to be shaken, but simply stared steadily through them both and went straight on. At last Kühlenbeck said: "Oh, let him come, war is war … if he gets tired one of the men must stay with him and take him back."

It was a long road that Ludwig Gödicke travelled in this way; the women round about him were praying, and there were bushes beside the road. When one group reached the end of their Aves, another took them up, and from the wood came the cry of a cuckoo. Some of the men, the little watchmaker Samwald among them, wore black suits like carpenters. Many things came nearer and closed up, especially when at the turnings the procession slowed down and the mourners' bodies were pressed closely together; and the women's skirts were like his own overall; their skirts struck against their legs when they walked; and a woman away in front was walking with her head bowed and her handkerchief before her face. And even if Gödicke did not look at anything, but held his eyes immovably fixed on the wheel tracks in front of him, trying, indeed, every now and then actually to keep his eyes closed just as firmly as his teeth were clenched, so that the parts of his soul crowded together still more closely, threatening to stifle his ego; yes, though he would actually have preferred to come to a stop, to ram his crutches into the ground and force all these

people to keep still and say nothing, or to scatter them all to the four winds; nevertheless he was drawn on, borne on, and he swam and floated, himself a swaying coffin, on the wave of ever-recurring prayer that accompanied him.

In the cemetery, when the body had once more been consecrated, and over the opened grave into which it was lowered the litany once more began: “Arisen from the dead,” and while the little watchmaker Samwald stood rigid, gazing into the hole and sobbing, and one by one the people went up to fling a spadeful of earth on the dead warrior and to shake the watchmaker by the hand, suddenly, uplifted before the eyes of all, the gigantic form of Gödicke, supported on his two sticks, in his long grey hospital overall, his long beard waving, appeared on the edge of the grave beside the little watchmaker and ignored the hand offered him, but said with a great effort, yet clearly enough for everybody to understand, his first words: “Arisen from the dead.” And thereupon he laid his sticks aside, yet not to take the spade and throw a little earth down into the grave; no, he did not do that, he did something quite different and unexpected; he addressed himself to the task of climbing down into the hole, he began laboriously and systematically to clamber down into it, and already by good luck had one leg over the edge. Naturally his intentions were incomprehensible to all the bystanders; they thought that without the support of his sticks he had simply fallen down out of sheer weakness. The Surgeon-Major and a few others rushed across, pulled him out of the hole and carried him to one of the benches. Perhaps by now the man Gödicke was really forsaken by his strength; in any case he offered no resistance, but sat there quite quietly with his eyes shut and his head a little to one side. But the watchmaker Samwald, who had run to him with the others and would have gladly helped to carry him, now stayed beside him; and as a great sorrow may sometimes shake up a man’s soul, Samwald divined that something very strange had happened to his companion; sitting beside the bricklayer Gödicke, he spoke to him comfortingly as to one who was bearing a sorrow, a heavy sorrow, and he spoke too of his own dead brother, who had had a beautiful and early and painless death. And Gödicke listened to him with his eyes shut.

Meanwhile the local celebrities advanced to the grave, among them, as was fitting, Huguenau in a blue suit, a stiff black hat in one hand, a wreath in the other. And Huguenau looked about him in extreme indignation because the deceased’s brother was not at hand to admire the wreath, a beautiful garland of oak-leaves sent by “The Moselle Memorial Association,” a really beautiful wreath with a ribbon on which could be read: “From the Fatherland to its brave soldier.”

CHAPTER LIII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (8)

Like the
quick
sperm of
future
shining seas
the
iridescent
foam holds,
one by one,
these
quivering
golden
shafts cast
by the sun
—
a spirit
moving on
the water’s
face—
and to the
far
horizon’s
edge they
gleam
where the
bright sky
begets itself
again,
itself a

mirror of
the glassy
plain,
sinking to
rest in
Aphrodite's
dream:
was this the
hour in
which he
was beset?
was this the
hour in
which the
anguish
fell,
twisting
him in the
throes and
pains of
hell,
bringing
forth
natural
need's
unnatural
get?
Was it a
wood like
this, beside
a field,
that sank
beneath his
feet so that
he reeled?
for in a
blinding
rain of fire
there spoke
a voice of
thunder;
headlong
he was
hurled,
nor did his
senses
waken till
he whirled
far down in
sulphurous
chasms of
glowing
rock,
dashed on
the stones,
the void
beneath his
feet,
breaking
himself as,
impotent,
he strove
to rise
again to
that lost
land above,
to that lost

land of
shade and
cypress
grove,
where
tangled
bushes dip
in waters
fleet,
where night
and day in
one green
twilight
meet,
where
delicate
sharp
odours drift
and twine
along the
glimmering
aisles of
beech and
pine,—
this was the
hour he
sought and
seeks for
ever
to win
again, the
hour for
ever lost,
ere like a
leaf by
sudden
tempest
tossed
that dread
voice
whirled
him off, the
hour for
him
of new-won
knowledge,
filling to
the brim
his cup of
being, even
while it
drained
all meaning
from the
draught,
and nought
remained
but
knowledge
big with
doubt in a
waste land,
a land
unending:
did the
cypress
stand

beside him?
Was there
sea? He
cannot tell.
He only
knows he
heard the
voice
resound,
the voice
that hurled
him
headlong
into hell,
the voice
that
masters
him and
holds him
bound.
Were that
hour once
re-won,
then,
purged of
sin,
he would
find long-
forgotten
things
break in,
bringing
the tang of
brine on
grass and
tree,
the
mirrored
shore
beside the
shining sea.
—
But new-
born
knowledge
drives him
on from
doubt
to doubt in
anguish,
hounds him
through the
wastes
to seek the
voice that
he can
never find,
the voice
he flees
when it
pursues
behind
yet
conjures
still to stop,
as on he
hastes,
by that

great oath
he falsely
swore to
One
who in days
past once
chose him
as a son,
him, the
betrayer;
and a
shriek
bursts out
from his
despairing
mouth, a
shriek that
wrongs
and deafens
knowledge,
a cry from
the abyss,
a cry that
shivers into
nothingness,
cry of the
helpless
animal at
bay,
cry of the
wild beast
trapped by
fiery
tongues;
O cry of
amazement!
cry of dire
dismay!
Do I feel it,
this wonder
of
amazement?
or is it
myself that
is amazed?
From what
far country
comest
thou by
right
to me, O
thought,
profoundest
Almost-but-
not-quite?
in the
blankness
of death I
hover,
Ahasuerus,
crying in
despair for
ever!
In hell's
sleepless,
bloodshot,
yellow light

my hands
are
withered
and blinded
my sight,
I,
Ahasuerus,
born to cry
for ever!
banished
my home,
by cliffs
hemmed
about,
nourished
in
knowledge
and
ravaged by
doubt,
sowing dry
stones and
fed on dry
dust,
fashioned
in
knowledge
and hollow
with lust,
blessed by
many, by
one voice
chidden,
the
sanctified
sower of
fruit
forbidden.

CHAPTER LIV

The Major was somewhat disagreeably surprised when the orderly reported that Herr Editor Esch wished to see him. Was this newspaper man an ambassador of Huguenau? an emissary of the pit and the underworld? This question made the Major almost forget that Huguenau had drawn a distinct line between himself and the presumably politically suspect Esch, and since a few moments' reflection suggested nothing decisive he said at last:

"Well, it doesn't matter … tell him to come in."

Esch certainly looked like neither an emissary from hell, nor a politically suspect individual; he was embarrassed and confused, like a man who was already regretting the step he had taken:

"Herr Major, my business is … Herr Major, in short, your article made a deep impression on me.…"

Major von Pasenow told himself that he must not allow himself to be taken in by hypocritical speeches, gratifying as it might be to believe that his words had had an effect.

"And if by the devil who must be driven out, the Herr Major meant me …"

Whereupon the Major found it necessary to make clear that a Biblical quotation implied no personal point or insinuation, for that would indeed be a degradation of the Bible, and that at every turning-point of our lives, if it was for the better, we had to put behind us a part of the devil. So that if Herr Esch had come to demand explanation or satisfaction, he could rest content with this statement.

While the Major was speaking Esch had regained his composure:

"No, Herr Major, that was not what I came about. I would even take that about the devil on my own shoulders, but not because my paper has been confiscated repeatedly," he made a disdainful gesture, "no, Herr Major, I can't be reproached for ever having run my paper less decently than I do now. I've come with another request."

And he demanded no more and no less than that the Major should point out the way of salvation to him

and his friends, or the brethren, as in his excitement he called them.

As he stood there before the Major's desk, his hat in his hands, a red flush of excitement showing on each cheek-bone, a red that ebbed into the brownish hollows beneath, Esch reminded the Major of his estate steward. What right had a steward to talk about religion? and the Major had the feeling that concern with religious questions was a prescriptive right of landowners. Pictures of the religious life he knew rose up in him, he saw the church to which he and his family drove in the high-wheeled coach over the dusty summer roads, in the low sledge well covered with furs during winter; he saw himself holding the usual Bible service for his children and the servants at Christmas and at Easter, saw the Polish maids walking in their red head-cloths and wide skirts to the Catholic Church in the neighbouring village, and as that church reminded him that Herr Esch belonged to the Roman Catholic persuasion, Esch was thus brought into an unpleasantly close relationship with the Polish land-workers and that disturbing atmosphere of unreliability with which, partly from personal experience, partly because of their politics, partly out of pure prejudice, he was accustomed to accredit the Polish nation. And as it is a fact that questions of conscience in a fellow-man very often throw us into embarrassment, as though he were exaggerating something that is not nearly so important to him as he makes out, the Major, while inviting Esch to be seated, did not make any reference to the theme he had opened, but merely inquired after the well-being of the paper.

Esch, however, was not a man to be so easily deflected from his purpose. "For the sake of the paper itself, Herr Major, you must listen to me"—and in answer to the Major's questioning look—" … yes, you, Herr Major, have prescribed a new policy for the *Kur-Trier Herald* … even though I've always said myself that order must be made in the world and that even an editor must do his part in it, that is, if he doesn't want to be an anarchist and a conscienceless swine … Herr Major, everybody seeks salvation, everybody is afraid of evil poison, everybody is waiting for redemption to come and injustice to be destroyed."

He had begun to shout and the Major looked at him in surprise. Esch pulled himself together again: "You see, Herr Major, Socialism is only one sign among many others … but since your article in the new issue … Herr Major, it's freedom and justice in the world that's at stake … one mustn't take human life lightly, something must happen, otherwise all the sacrifice will have been in vain."

"All the sacrifice in vain …" repeated the Major as though out of an old memory. But then he collected himself. "Perhaps you want, Herr Esch, to steer the paper back into the Socialist stream? And do you actually expect me to support you in that?"

Esch's bearing was contemptuous and disrespectful:

"It's not a question of Socialism, Herr Major … it's a question of the new life … of decency … of searching together for the faith … my friends and I have started a Bible class … Herr Major, when you wrote your article you meant every word of it in your heart, and you can't reject us now."

It was clear: Esch was presenting an account, even although only a spiritual one, and the Major could not but think again of his steward sitting opposite him in the office with his accounts, and he thought too of the Polish farm-labourers, who were always trying to get the better of him. Was this man not threatening him with his Socialism? Perhaps it was something long forgotten that he repeated when he said:

"Someone always rejects us, Herr Esch."

Esch had got up and, yielding to habit, had begun to walk with awkward strides up and down the room. The sharp vertical folds at either side of his mouth were still deeper than usual; how careworn he looks, thought the Major, incredible that this earnest man should be a tavern frequenter or a visitor to disreputable resorts, an emissary from the underworld. Can he be such a hypocrite? It was as impossible to imagine as that underworld itself.

Esch planted himself directly in front of the Major:

"Herr Major, to put it quite frankly … how can I fill my position when I'm not even clear whether our path might not be made plainer by accepting the Protestant faith.…"

Now the Major could of course have responded that it was not one of an editor's duties to solve theological problems,—but he was too much alarmed by Esch's direct question to find any answer at all: it was not so unlike Huguenau's entreaties to be given the army printing, and for a moment the figures of the two men seemed about to blend together again. The Major put up his hand to the Iron Cross on his breast and his bearing became official: was it fitting that he, an officer in a prominent position, should make proselytes? The Catholic Church counted after all as a sort of ally, and he would not have taken it upon him to induce an Austrian or a Bulgarian or a Turk to give up the ties binding him to his own state in favour of Germany. It was really annoying, the way that this Esch insisted on his pound of flesh, and yet again it was flattering and alluring; in this appeal to him was there not something of the faith that for ever renews and regenerates religion? But the Major still resisted, and begged to point out that, himself a Protestant, he did not feel competent to counsel a Catholic in matters of belief.

Esch once more made a disdainful gesture with his hand,—that was beside the question: in the Major's

article it said that Christian must stand by Christian—so there was no difference between Catholic and Protestant Christianity, and the town priest paid little enough attention to such scruples.

The Major did not reply. Was it really a net made out of his own words that was being drawn round him? with which this man wished to drag him down into the darkness and the pit? And yet it was as though a gentle hand were stretched out to lead him forth to the peaceful banks of quiet waters. He could not help thinking of the baptism in Jordan, and almost against his will he said:

"There's no rule in matters of faith, Herr Esch; faith is a natural fountain that springs up, as we are told in the Bible," and then he added reflectively, "every one must come to know divine grace by himself."

Esch had turned his back discourteously on the Major; he stood at the window with his forehead pressed against the window pane. Now he turned round: his expression was grave, almost imploring:

"Herr Major, it isn't a question of rules … it's a question of trust …" and after a little: "otherwise it would be …" he could not find the right word, "otherwise the paper would be no better than all the other papers … a corrupt Press … eyewash for demagogues … but you, Herr Major, wanted something different.…"

Once more Major von Pasenow felt the sweetness of yielding, of being carried away; it was as though a silvery cloud sought to catch him up, floating over the spring streams. The security of trust! No, that man standing so seriously before him was no adventurer, no traitor, no unreliable Pole, not a man to carry your confidence over to the other side and there shamelessly and openly expose it. So at first hesitatingly, but becoming warmer as he went on, the Major began to speak of Luther's teaching, in following which nobody need despair, nobody, Herr Esch! for everyone carried the divine spark somewhere in his soul, and—the strength with which Major von Pasenow felt this he was unable even to express—no one was shut out from grace, and everyone who was granted grace might go forth to preach redemption. And any man who looked deeply into his own heart would recognize the truth and the way; and Esch too would find his way to the light and follow it. "Be comforted, Herr Editor," he said, "it will all turn out for the best." And he would be glad to talk to Herr Esch again if Herr Esch should desire it and his own scanty leisure permitted—the Major had risen and reached Esch his hand across the desk—besides he would be coming presently to have a look over the publishing office of the *Kur-Trier Herald.* He nodded to Esch. Esch remained irresolutely standing, and the Major feared a speech of thanks. But he received no thanks, for Esch asked almost roughly: "And my friends?" The Major once more became slightly official: "Later, Herr Esch, later perhaps." And Esch bowed awkwardly and retired.

Nevertheless for a man so radically impetuous as Esch there was no hanging back after this. When a few days later—to the astonishment of everybody who heard of it, and that was presently the whole town—he joined the Protestant Church, it seemed to his ardent soul an act of homage to the Major at the same time.

CHAPTER LV

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (7)

Historical Excursus.

That criminal and rebellious age known as the Renaissance, that age in which the Christian scheme of values was broken in two halves, one Catholic and the other Protestant, that age in which with the falling asunder of the medieval organon a process of dissolution destined to go on for five centuries was inaugurated and the seeds of the modern world planted, that age at once of sowing and of first blossoming cannot be comprehensively subsumed either under its Protestantism or its individualism or its nationalism or its joyous sensuousness, or even under its revival of humanism and natural science: if that age, which in its style presented such an obvious appearance of unity, and is now regarded as a coherent whole, possessed a homogeneous spirit commensurable with that unity and producing that style, it is certainly not to be found in any one phenomenon selected from its various manifestations, not even in a phenomenon of such profound revolutionary force as Protestantism; rather must all these phenomena be referred to a common denominator, they must all possess a common root, and that root must have lain in the logical structure of thought itself, in that specific logic which penetrated and informed all the activities of the epoch.

Now it may be asserted with some confidence that a sweeping revolution in the style of thinking—and the revolutionary aspect of all these phenomena entitles us to infer such a complete revolution in thinking —invariably results from the fact that thought has reached its provisional limit of infinity, that it is no longer able to resolve the antinomies of infinity by the old methods, and so is compelled to revise its own basic principles.

We have before our own eyes a very clear example of such a process in the research into first principles of modern mathematics, which, starting from the antinomies of infinity, has achieved a revolution of

mathematical method whose extent cannot yet be estimated. True, it is impossible to decide whether here we are dealing with a new revolution in thought, or with the final and definitive liquidation of medieval logic (probably with both). For not only has a residue of medieval values survived right up to our time, giving room for the assumption that its concomitant ways of thinking have also survived; it is to be remarked as well that the paradox of all antinomies and the very essence of the antinomies of infinity is the fact that they derive from the deductive method: but that means that they derive from theological method, for there is no world system of theology that is not deductive, in other words that does not seek by reason to deduce all phenomena from a supreme principle, from God; and in the last resort every form of Platonism is thus deductive theology. So even if the Platonic-theological content in the system of modern mathematics is not immediately visible, and perhaps must even remain invisible while mathematics remains an adequate expression of the logic that prevails over mathematics as well as over everything else, yet there is a striking affinity between the antinomies of infinity postulated by mathematics and those of medieval scholasticism. The medieval discussion of the infinite, of course, did not take place on the mathematical plane (or only parenthetically, in cosmic speculations), but the “ethical” infinite, as one may venture to call it, such as is implied in the perennial problem of the infinite attributes of God, includes all the questions about actual and potential infinity and posits the same structural limitations that puzzle modern mathematics and provide its antinomies. In both cases the substance of the antinomy arises from the absoluteness with which logic is applied, an absoluteness that cannot be avoided so long as logic prevails, and that can be recognized only when the antinomian limits are reached. Among the scholastics this misleading absolutism found expression chiefly in the interpretation of symbols: the concreteness of the Church in its earthly and finite form that nevertheless claimed to be absolute could not but draw in its train a finite limitation of all symbolic forms, and though the result was a system of marvellous symbol-mirages, a system rising from symbol to symbol, overshadowed and bound in a magical unity by the heavenly-earthly, infinite-finite symbol of the Eucharist, yet it could not stave off inevitable collapse; for at its antinomian limits of infinity scholastic thought had to break down, to turn back and solve once more through dialectic the now finite Platonic idea, that is to say, to prepare the reaction towards Positivism, and to enter on that automatic development whose beginnings were already visible in the Aristotelian formation of the Church, and whose further progress, in spite of manifold attempts by the scholastics to hold it up (the theory of twofold truth, the quarrel between nominalists and realists, Occam’s new formulation of the theory of knowledge) could no longer be checked; scholastic thought had to founder on its own absolutism, its own antinomies of infinity,—its logic was abrogated.

But thought corresponds to reality only for so long as its logicalness remains undisputed. This applies to all thinking, not merely to deductive dialectic (all the more as it is impossible to distinguish how much deduction is inherent in any act of thinking). It would be wrong, however, to say that deduction became suspect because people had suddenly learned to look at facts with different and better eyes; the exact reverse is the case: things are only regarded with different eyes once dialectic has broken down, and that breakdown occurs not at the point where thought interprets reality, since reality would go on indefinitely submitting itself to such interpretation, but anterior to that, in thought’s own province of logic, namely in face of the problems raised by infinity. The patience with which mankind suffers the authority of logic is simply inexhaustible and can be compared only to the imperturbable patience with which it submits to the art of medicine: and just as the human body confides itself to the most nonsensical medical cures, and is actually cured by them, so reality submits to the erection of the most impossible theoretic structures,—and so long as the theory does not itself declare its bankruptcy it will be supported with confidence, and reality will remain tractable. Only after bankruptcy has been openly declared does man begin to rub his eyes and look once more at reality; only then does he seek the source of knowledge in living experience instead of in ratiocination.

These two phases of spiritual revolution can be clearly perceived in the declining years of the Middle Ages: the bankruptcy of scholastic dialectic, and thereafter the—truly Copernican—rotation of attention to the immediate object. Or, in other words, it is the change from Platonism to Positivism, from the speech of God to the language of things.

Yet with this change from the centralization of an ecclesiastical organon to the multifariousness of direct experience, with this transition from the Platonic pattern of medieval theocracy to the positivist contemplation of the empirically given and endlessly shifting world, with this atomizing of a former whole, there had to be a concurrent atomizing of value-systems in so far as these were related to object-systems. In short, values are no longer determined by a central authority, but take their colouring from the object: what matters is no longer the conservation of Biblical cosmogony, but the “scientific” observation of natural objects and the experiments that can be carried out on them; the politician is no longer concerned to model a divine state, but to manage a newly autonomous political unit that makes inevitable the emergence of

new and efficient political methods in the shape of Machiavellianism; the warrior is no longer concerned with absolute war, such as took concrete shape in the Crusades, but with earthly squabbles carried on with new-fangled and unchivalrous weapons, such as firearms; no longer is it Christendom as a whole that is in question, but only certain empirical groups of men held together by the external bond of national language; nor is it man as the member of an ecclesiastical organon that the new individualism studies, but man as an individual in himself with his individual significance; and lastly the aim of art is no longer solely and finally the glorification of the community of saints, but the faithful observation of the external world, that faithfulness of representation which constitutes the naturalism of the Renaissance. Yet worldly as this obsession with the immediate object may seem, even purely pagan as it perhaps struck people at the time, so pagan that the newly discovered ancients were joyfully invoked as confederates, the inner object forced itself upon men's attention with no less violence than the outer, indeed the immediacy of experience in the Renaissance is perhaps most immediate of all in its introspection: with this inward turning of the eye, with this discovery of the divine spark in the soul, God, who hitherto had been allowed to manifest Himself only through the medium of an ecclesiastical Platonic hierarchy, now became the object of immediate mystical apprehension, the re-won assurer of divine grace,—and this extraordinary juxtaposition of the most extreme pagan worldliness with the most unconditional inwardness of Protestant mysticism, this co-existence of the most disparate tendencies within the same province of style, would certainly be quite inexplicable were it not that it can be referred to the common denominator of immediacy. Like all other phenomena of the Renaissance, and perhaps in still greater measure than the others, Protestantism is a phenomenon of immediacy.

But yet another and very decisive characteristic of that epoch may here find its determining cause: the glorification of "action," the phenomenon of the "deed," which is so conspicuous in all expressions of life in the Renaissance, and not least in Protestantism; that nascent contempt for the word which tries to confine the function of language as far as possible to its autonomous realms of poetry and rhetoric, refusing it access to other spheres and substituting for it as sole operating factor the man who acts; that movement towards a dumbness which was to prepare the way for the dumbness of a whole world: all this stands in a relation which cannot be ignored to the disintegration of the world into separate value-systems, and follows from that changing-over to the language of things which, to keep the metaphor, is a dumb language. It is almost like a testimony to the fact that any understanding between the separate value-systems was superfluous, or as though such an understanding might falsify the severity and singleness of the language of things. The two great rational vehicles of understanding in the modern world, the language of science in mathematics and the language of money in book-keeping, both find their starting-point in the Renaissance, both arise from that single and exclusive concentration on a single value-system, from that esoteric theory of expression, which might be called ascetic in its severity. Yet such an attitude had little in common with the asceticism of Catholic monks, for unlike the latter it was not a means to an end, not a device for summoning ecstatic "aid," but sprang from the singleness of action, of that "action" which was thenceforth accounted the sole unambiguous language and the sole determining force. So Protestantism also by its origin and its nature is an "action"; it presupposes a religiously active man, seeking God, finding God, a man endowed with the same positive activity as the new scientific researcher, or, indeed, the new type of soldier or politician. Luther's religion was through and through that of a man of action, and at bottom anything but contemplative. But even in the heart of the action, at the core of this matter-of-fact sense of actuality, there lay the same severity, the same categorical imperative of duty, the same exclusion of all other value-systems; that literally iconoclastic asceticism of a Calvin which one might almost call an epistemological asceticism, and which drove Erasmus to the point of insisting that music should be excluded from the service of God.

Yet the Middle Ages too had recognized the force of action. And no matter how violently the new positivism recoiled from Platonic scholasticism, in referring the individual to the solitary authority of his ego it also laid bare the "positivist roots" of Platonism. The new Christianity did not merely protest, it reformed as well, it looked upon itself throughout as a Renaissance of the Christian idea; and although at first it had no theology, it developed later, on a more autonomous and restricted basis, a purely Platonic and idealistic theology: for that is what Kantian philosophy amounts to. So the orientation of values, the ethical imperative directing action, remained the same as in the Middle Ages, and indeed could not have changed, for value consists only in the effective will to value and to unconditionality—there are no values save absolute values. What had changed was the delimitation of the value-producing action: hitherto the intensity of human aspiration towards the absolute had been concentrated on the total value of the Christian organon; now, however, all the radicality of a self-dependent logic, all the severity of autonomy, was directed to each system of values separately, each value-system was raised to an absolute value of its own, and that vehemence was engendered which was to maintain these absolute values side by side in

isolation without reference to each other, that vehemence which gives the age of the Renaissance its characteristic colouring.

Of course it could be objected that the general style of the age embraced indifferently all the disparate value-systems, that the personality of Luther, for instance, was by no means ascetically limited to one single system, but strikingly united in a characteristic fashion both religious and worldly impulses. In return it could be just as reasonably asserted that we are dealing here with the mere beginnings of a movement that needed five hundred years for its full development, that the age was still full of yearning for the medieval synthesis, and that it was precisely a personality like Luther's, a personality subsuming in itself the most disparate tendencies, not by force of logic but by virtue of its human breadth, that met the needs of the age half way, and dominated and influenced it to an incomparably greater degree than the more "logical" Calvin. It is as if the age were still full of fear in face of the new "severity" and the approaching dumbness of the world, as if it wanted to shout down that dreadful approaching dumbness, and for this reason, perhaps, had to bring to birth the new language of God, the new polyphonic music. But these are assumptions that cannot be proved. On the other hand it can be taken for granted that this uncertain state of the age, this confusion of inchoate impulses, made possible the Counter-reformation; that the fear of approaching loneliness and isolation opened the way for a movement which promised to regain the lost unity. For the Counter-reformation took upon itself the gigantic task of gathering in again the value-systems excluded by the narrow and ascetic religiousness of Protestantism, of attempting a new synthesis of the world and all its values, and, under the guidance of the new Jesuit scholasticism, of once more striving towards the lost medieval wholeness, so that, enthroned as the supreme value, the Platonic unity of the Church might maintain for ever its divine position above all other values of the world.

CHAPTER LVI

The watchmaker Samwald often came out to the hospital now. He lingered at the places where his brother had been tended, and, wishful to show his gratitude, not only regulated the clocks of the hospital free of cost, but also offered to repair gratis the inmates' watches. And then he went to see Gödicke of the Landwehr.

Gödicke looked forward to these visits. Since the funeral many things had become clearer and less disturbing to him: the earthly part of his life had become more solid, and yet it seemed to be growing loftier and airier, without losing any of its stability. He knew now quite clearly that he need no longer be terrified at the looming darkness behind which stood that other Gödicke, or more precisely the many Gödickes of yore, for that dark barrier was nothing but the period during which he had lain in the grave. And should anyone come up and try to remind him of what was on the other side, of what had happened before his burial, he need no longer have any fear, but could, as it were, dismiss it with a shrug of the shoulders, knowing that it had ceased to be of any consequence. All that he had to do was to bide his time, for he need not dread the life that was condensing round him now, even when it pressed quite close upon him; for he had already put death behind him, and everything that came would simply serve to build the scaffolding yet higher. True, he still did not utter a word, nor did he listen when the sisters of his ward-mates addressed him; but his deafness and dumbness were now far less a defence of his ego and his solitude than an advertisement of his contempt for those who disturbed his peace. The watchmaker Samwald was the only one he tolerated, indeed he looked forward to his coming.

Samwald certainly made things easy for him. Even though Gödicke walked with his body bent, leaning on his two sticks, he could look down on the little watchmaker; but that was not what mattered most. More important was the fact that Samwald, as though he knew whom he was dealing with, made not the slightest attempt to question him or to remind him of anything that he, Ludwig Gödicke, did not like. In truth Samwald was not a great talker at any time. As they sat together on a seat in the garden he would show Gödicke a watch that he had taken over for repair, making the cover fly open so that one could see the works, and trying to explain where the defect lay. Or he would speak of his dead brother, who, so he said, was to be envied, for he had got over his troubles and was now in a happier land. But when the watchmaker Samwald went on to speak of Paradise and its heavenly joys, on the one hand that was to be discountenanced, for it pertained to the confirmation class attended by a long-discarded Ludwig Gödicke, yet on the other hand it was a sort of homage to the man Gödicke, like a question addressed to one who was already on the farther side and knew all about it. And when Samwald spoke of Bible gatherings which he was in the custom of attending and from which he derived much enlightenment, when he maintained that the misery of this war must finally lead to a brighter day of salvation, Gödicke did not bother to listen; yet it was vaguely a kind of corroboration of his new-won life, and a challenge to take up in that life a fitting and as it were a postmortem position. The little watchmaker seemed to him then like one of the lads

or women who carried the hods of bricks to the wall, and whom one never talked to civilly but merely ordered about, yet whom one needed nevertheless. This too may have been the reason why he once interrupted the little watchmaker in his stories with the order: “Bring me a beer,” and when the beer did not promptly arrive he stared in front of him in incomprehending indignation. For many days he was angry with Samwald and refused to look at him, and Samwald racked his brains trying to find some way of propitiating Gödicke again. That was difficult enough. For Gödicke did not himself know that he was angry with Samwald, and he suffered a great deal from the fact that under the compulsion of an unknown decree he had to turn his face away whenever Samwald appeared. And it was not that he regarded Samwald as the originator of the decree; but he blamed him most bitterly for the fact that the decree was not rescinded. It was a sort of laborious search for each other that arose between the two men, and it was almost an inspiration of the watchmaker’s when one day he seized Gödicke by the hand and led him away.

It was a fine warm afternoon, and the watchmaker Samwald led Gödicke the one-time bricklayer by the sleeve of his tunic, cautiously, step by step, taking care to avoid the jagged flint-stones on the road. Sometimes they rested. And when they had rested for a while Samwald tugged at Gödicke’s sleeve, and Gödicke got up and they went on again. In this way they arrived at Esch’s house.

The ladder leading up to the editorial office was too steep for Gödicke, so Samwald deposited him on the bench in front of the garden and ascended alone: he came back presently with Esch and Fendrich. “This is Gödicke,” said Samwald. Gödicke made no sign. Esch led them towards the summer-house. But in front of the two forcing frames, whose glass covers were open, for Esch had been sowing for the autumn crop, Gödicke remained standing, gazing into their depths at the bottom of which lay the brown mould. Esch said: “Well?” But Gödicke still went on staring into the frames. So they all remained standing, bareheaded and in their dark suits, as though they were gathered round an open grave. Samwald said: “It was Herr Esch who started the Bible class … we are all seeking guidance from Heaven.” Then Gödicke laughed, he did not laugh scornfully, it was only perhaps a somewhat noisy laugh, and he said: “Ludwig Gödicke, arisen from the dead,” he did not say it very loudly, and he looked triumphantly at Esch, more, he straightened himself from his humble and bowed posture and was almost as big as Esch. Fendrich, who carried the Bible under his arm, regarded him with the feverish eyes of a consumptive, and then he softly touched Gödicke’s uniform, as though he wished to make certain that Gödicke was really present in the flesh. But for Gödicke that seemed to finish the matter, he had done his part, it had not even been a very great strain, he could afford to rest now, and so he simply let himself down on the wooden edge of the frame, waiting for Samwald to sit down beside him. Samwald said: “He’s tired,” and Esch went with long strides back into the courtyard and shouted up to Frau Esch at the kitchen window to bring some coffee. Then Frau Esch brought out coffee, and they fetched Herr Lindner too from the printing-shed to drink coffee with them, and they stood round Gödicke while he sat on the edge of the frame, and gazed at him sipping his coffee. And none of them saw what Gödicke saw. And after Gödicke had been refreshed by the coffee Samwald once more took him by the hand, and they set out on their way back to the hospital. They went cautiously, and Samwald saw to it that Gödicke did not step on the jagged flints. Sometimes they rested. And when Samwald smiled at his companion, Gödicke no longer turned his eyes away.

CHAPTER LVII

Yes, Huguenau was in a very bad humour. The printed appeals for the Iron Bismarck had been wretchedly botched. That the printing-office did not possess a block of Bismarck’s head was perhaps excusable, but not even a proper Iron Cross with laurel wreath complete was to be found in the place, and so there had been nothing for it but to embellish each of the four corners of the appeal with one of the little Iron Crosses usually employed to mark the death notices of soldiers killed in the war. He wouldn’t have gone personally with the miserable sheet to the Major at all if he hadn’t had a piece of good news as well: a firm of carvers in Giessen, whose advertisement he had discovered and to whom he had immediately wired, were prepared to supply a Bismarck statue within two weeks. But naturally enough the Major must have been deeply disappointed by the tasteless appeal; at first he had not even listened to Huguenau, and had dismissed his excuses with an ill-humoured and indifferent: “It doesn’t matter.” And even though he had finally condescended to fix his visit for to-day, yet he had spoilt it immediately by inquiring after Esch. That was all the more unjust, seeing that Esch himself was to blame for the lack of decent blocks in the printing-office.

His hands in his trousers-pockets, Huguenau strolled up and down the courtyard and waited for the Major. As for Esch, he had manœuvred him out of the way quite nicely. It had been quite a sly move to dissuade him the day before from going out to the paper factory—and then to-day one found that it had been a mistake after all, and that strangely enough there was a shortage of paper, and so the Herr Editor

had just had to go. Unfortunately the lout had considered it necessary to take his bicycle, and if the Major put off coming for very much longer the whole manœuvre would be up the spout, and the two of them would meet after all.

It was a warm sultry day. Huguenau looked now and then at his watch, then he went into the garden, surveyed the fruit, which hung on the branches still unripe, and estimated the crop. Well, in these times things would never be allowed to ripen; long before that everything would be stolen. One fine morning Esch would find his garden cleared out. It wouldn't be long either; on the sunny side the plums were already reddening, and Huguenau put up his hand and tested the fruit between his fingers. Esch should put barbed wire round his garden; but the crop was certainly not worth so much expense. After the war barbed wire would be cheap enough.

Waiting is like barbed wire stretched inside one. Huguenau looked once more up into the branches, blinked up at the grey clouds; where the sun should be they brightened to a dazzling white. He whistled for Marguerite several times; but she did not appear and Huguenau became annoyed; of course she was down at the river again with those boys. He felt inclined to go and fetch her. But he had to wait for the Major.

Suddenly—he was just on the point of whistling for her again—Marguerite stood before him. He said severely: "Where have you been hiding again? There's visitors coming." Then he took her hand, and crossing the courtyard they went through the entry hall to the street and kept watch for the Major. I sent Esch off too soon, Huguenau could not help telling himself again and again.

At last the Major appeared round the corner; he was accompanied by the aged commissariat officer, who also filled the rôle of adjutant to the Town Commandant. Although Huguenau had reckoned on having the Major to himself, he felt nevertheless flattered that the visit should take such an official form. Really it had been stupid to let Esch go, the whole staff should have formed up in line and Marguerite in a white dress should have presented a bouquet of flowers. In some way or other Esch was responsible for this omission too, but there it was, anyhow, and Huguenau's ceremonial fervour had to be confined to a few low bows when the two officers stopped in front of the house.

Fortunately the commissariat officer said good-bye at the door, so that the occasion ceased to be official and became private, and when the Major crossed the threshold Huguenau fairly shone with affability and devotion. "Marguerite, make a curtsy," he commanded. Marguerite stared into the strange man's face. The Major ran his fingers through her black curls: "Well, won't you say how do you do, little Tartar?" Huguenau apologized: "It's Esch's little girl.…" The Major raised Marguerite's chin: "So you're Herr Esch's daughter?" "She's only staying here—a sort of foster-child," Huguenau said. The Major stroked her curls again: "Little black Tartar," he repeated as they passed through the entry to the courtyard. "French by birth, Herr Major … Esch intends to adopt her eventually … but that's unnecessary, she has an aunt in any case … wouldn't Herr Major like to see the printing-office straight away? please step this way, to the right.…" Huguenau ran in front. "Very well, Herr Huguenau," said the Major, "but I should like to say good-day to Herr Esch first." "Esch will be here in a few minutes, Herr Major, I thought that the Herr Major would like to look over the printing-shop first without being disturbed." "Herr Esch does not disturb me in the least," said the Major, and Huguenau was dashed by his somewhat sharp tone. Esch must have been intriguing somehow … well, he would soon get on his track yet and then there would be a full-flavoured secret report number 2. And because such a report was a certainty, Huguenau felt reassured, for no one can endure this inner stream of events to be held up or dammed by external forces. And so Huguenau said formally: "Herr Esch unfortunately had to go to the paper factory … I had to make sure that the paper would be delivered … but perhaps the Herr Major would like to inspect the printing-shop meanwhile."

The press was set in motion in honour of the Major, and in honour of the Major Huguenau quite gratuitously had a section of the appeal for "The Moselle Memorial Association" run off. He still held Marguerite by the hand, and when Lindner drew off the first sheets of the appeal, Huguenau lifted the uppermost one and held it out to the Major. He felt compelled to apologize once more: "It's a very simple make-up, I'm afraid; at the very least it should have had a proper Iron Cross with a laurel wreath … in a matter under the immediate patronage of the Herr Major."

The Major had put up his hand to the Iron Cross at his buttonhole and seemed reassured to find it still hanging there. "Oh, the Iron Cross—you don't need another, surely that would be superfluous." Huguenau bowed: "Yes, the Herr Major is quite right, in such difficult times a modest make-up will have to do, I can only agree with the Herr Major there, but a modest little block wouldn't have added much to the outlay … of course that's a matter of indifference to Herr Esch." The Major did not seem to have heard. But after a while he said: "I think, Herr Huguenau, that you do Herr Esch an injustice." Huguenau smiled politely and a little scornfully. But the Major was not looking at him, but at Marguerite: "I would have taken her for a Slav, this little black Tartar girl." Huguenau felt called upon to mention once more that the child was French by birth. "She only comes here." The Major bent down to Marguerite: "I've a little girl like

you at home too, she's a little bigger, it's true, fourteen … and not as black as a little Tartar either … her name is Elisabeth …" and after a while he said: "So, a little French girl." "She can only speak German," said Huguenau, "she's forgotten everything." The Major asked: "And do you love your foster-parents very much?" "Yes," said Marguerite, and Huguenau was astonished that she could tell such a lie, but as the Major seemed absent-minded he repeated distinctly: "She stays with her relations." The Major said: "Driven from home …" that really sounded somewhat absent-minded, he was an old gentleman after all, and Huguenau said in corroboration: "Quite true, Herr Major, the right phrase, driven from home.…" The Major looked at Marguerite attentively. Huguenau said alluringly: "The case-room, Herr Major, you haven't seen the case-room yet." The Major passed his hand over the child's brow: "You mustn't look so cross, you mustn't wrinkle up your brow like that …" the child considered earnestly and then said: "Why not?" The Major smiled, passed his fingers lightly over her eyelids, under which the hard eyeballs rested, smiled and said: "Little girls mustn't have furrows on their brows … that's a sin … hidden and yet visible, that's what sin always is." Marguerite recoiled and Huguenau remembered how she had broken away from Esch; she was quite right, he thought. The Major now passed his hand over his own eyes: "Well, it doesn't matter …" and Huguenau felt that the Major too was struggling to break away, though with feeble powers, and he was actually glad when he saw Esch on his rather too low bicycle, which made him look bandy-legged, riding into the courtyard and springing off by the outside ladder.

They all went into the courtyard to greet Esch; the Major stood between Huguenau and the little girl.

Esch leant his bicycle against the wall beneath the ladder and went slowly up to the group. He showed no trace of surprise at finding the Major there, so little surprise did he show and so calmly did he greet the guest, that Huguenau began to suspect that this lean schoolmaster already knew of the visit. So he gave vent to his ill-humour:

"What do you say to this unexpected honour? Aren't you even surprised?"

"I'm very glad," said Esch.

The Major said:

"I'm very glad that you've returned in time, Herr Esch."

Esch said gravely:

"Perhaps at the eleventh hour, Herr Major."

Huguenau said:

"It isn't so very late yet … would the Herr Major like to see the other offices too? the ladder, I'm afraid, is a little awkward."

Esch said:

"It was a long way."

The child said:

"He came on his bicycle."

The Major said dreamily:

"A long way … and he is not yet at the goal."

Huguenau said:

"We've the worst already behind us … we've two pages of advertisements already … and if we could secure the orders of the military authorities as well …"

Esch said:

"It's not a question of advertisements."

Huguenau said:

"We haven't even a block of an Iron Cross—I suppose you think that doesn't matter either!"

The child pointed at the Major's chest:

"There's an Iron Cross."

The Major said:

"The true badge of honour is always invisible, only sin is visible."

The child said:

"Lying is the greatest sin."

Esch said:

"The invisible is at our backs, we come out of falsehood, and if we do not find the way we must lose ourselves in the darkness of the invisible."

The child said:

"Nobody hears you when you tell a lie."

The Major said:

"God hears it."

Huguenau said:

“Nobody hears a deserter, nobody recognizes him, even if all he says is right.”
Esch said:
“Nobody can see another in the darkness.”
The Major said:
“Visible, and yet hidden from each other.”
The child said:
“God doesn’t hear it.”
Esch said:
“He will hear again the voices of His children.”
Huguenau said:
“It’s best for nobody to hear one, one must fight one’s way by oneself … we’ll bring it off yet.”
The Major said:
“We have forsaken Him and He has left us to ourselves … so alone that we can no longer find each other.”
Esch said:
“Imprisoned in our loneliness.”
The child said:
“No one will be able to find me.”
The Major said:
“The one we forsake we must seek for ever.”
Huguenau said:
“Do you want to hide?”
“Yes,” said the child.
The milky grey sky began to break up; in several places it became blue. Barefooted and inaudible, the little girl had flitted away. Then the men went too. Each in a different direction.

CHAPTER LVIII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (9)

Well, they were with me again yesterday, Nuchem and Marie, and we sang together. At my suggestion we sang first of all the hymn:

To battle out we march elate,
Firm faith our dauntless gage,
We do not fear the Devil’s hate,
And laugh at all his rage.
Our banner proudly waves before
And fills our souls with might;
Still in the forefront as of yore,
It leads us to the fight.

Chorus

We will be

faithful to
our King,
Till death
we will be
true,
And follow
on through
everything
Our flag
gold, red
and blue.

We sang it to the air of Andreas Hofer's song, Marie accompanied it on the lute, Nuchem hummed and beat time with his soft smooth hands. During the singing they exchanged glances a few times, but it may have been that I only fancied so, for Dr Litwak's talk had made me suspicious. At any rate I bawled out the song as loud as I could, and that for various reasons. For on the one hand I wanted to reassure Nuchem's family, who doubtless were assembled outside my door by this time: the children in the very front, probably, with their ears pressed against the door panel, then the white-bearded grandfather with his body bent forward, his hand forming an ear-trumpet, while the women kept more in the background, perhaps one of them weeping quietly to herself, the whole bunch gradually drawing nearer, yet not daring to open the door,—yes, on the one hand I wanted to reassure them, but on the other hand it was a sadistic pleasure to me to know that they were out there, and to allure and repulse them at the same moment. But by bawling so loudly I wished also to say to Nuchem and Marie: don't stand on ceremony, my children, you see that I'm occupied with myself and my voice, unbutton your frock-coat, Nuchem, lift the tails of your coat and make a bow to the lady, and you, Marie, throw off your prudishness, lift your skirt with two fingers, and dance, both of you, dance to Jerusalem, dance in my bed, make yourselves at home. And so I no longer even sang Marie's words to the air, but my own, the authentic ones: "To Mantua in chains was led, Brave Hofer leal and true," unfortunately that was all I knew, but I modulated these lines to the tune and found that they went beautifully.

At last, however, Marie concluded the song with the flourish that always rounds off songs sung to the lute, and she said:

"We did that splendidly, now as a reward we'll have a little prayer too."

And already she had slipped down on her knees before her chair, raised her clasped hands to her face, and begun the hundred and twenty-second psalm:

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together: Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord."

I could not have stopped her except by smashing the lute over her head. So I knelt down too, stretched my arms out and prayed: "Let us make tea for the daughters and young men of Israel, let us pour rum into the tea, war-rum, hero's rum, synthetic rum, that we may forget our loneliness, for our loneliness is too great, whether it be in Zion or in the holy city of Berlin." But while I was uttering these words and beating my breast with my fists, Nuchem had got up: he planted himself before me, he turned his bottom to me, and with his praying countenance fixed on the open window, at which the greasy and torn curtains fluttered in the night breeze like a faded gold, red and blue army banner, he set his swaying body in motion. Oh, that was indecent, that was indecent of Nuchem, who after all was my friend.

I sprang to the door, tore it open and shouted:

"Come in, Israel, drink tea with us, behold the obscene postures of my friend and the unveiled face of the lady."

The lobby, however, the lobby was empty. They had slipped away, they had scattered into their rooms, the women tumbling over the children, the rheumatic grandfather, who could not straighten himself, along with them.

"Splendid," said I, closing the door and turning once more to my familiar spirits, "splendid, my children, now give each other the kiss of Zion."

But the two of them stood there with their arms hanging, and did not dare to seize each other or to dance; smiling sheepishly they simply stood there. And finally we sat down and drank tea.

CHAPTER LIX

THE SYMPOSIUM OR DIALOGUE ON REDEMPTION

Incapable of communicating himself to others, incapable of breaking out of his isolation, doomed to remain the mere actor of his life, the deputy of his own ego—all that any human being can know of another is a mere symbol, the symbol of an ego that remains beyond our grasp, possessing no more value than that of a symbol; and all that can be told is the symbol of a symbol, a symbol at a second, third, *n*th. remove, asking for representation in the true double sense of the word. Therefore it will raise no difficulty for anyone, and will at least make for brevity, if we imagine that Herr and Frau Esch together with the Major and Herr Huguenau find themselves in a scene on the stage, involved in a performance which no human being can escape: that of play-acting.

At the table in ESCH'S *summer-house are sitting* FRAU ESCH, *on her right the* MAJOR, *on her left* HUGUENAU, *opposite her* (*with his back to the audience*) HERR ESCH. *The evening meal is over. On the table are the bread and the wine, the latter of which* HERR ESCH *has procured from a vineyard proprietor who advertises in his paper.*

Darkness is beginning to fall. In the background the contours of the mountains can still be discerned. Two candles burn within glass globes to protect them from the breeze: moths flutter round them. The jerky asthmatic pounding of the printing-press can be heard.

ESCH: May I fill your glass again, Herr Major?

HUGUENAU: Tip-top wine, no doubt about it … we Alsatians must take a back seat after this when our wine is mentioned. Does the Herr Major know our Alsatian wine?

MAJOR (*absently*): I don't think so.

HUGUENAU: Well, it's a harmless wine … we Alsatians are altogether harmless … an honest tipple you could call it, all frank and above-board (*he laughs*) and all it does to you is to make you simply and naturally tight … you go to sleep when you've had enough, that's all.

ESCH: To be drunk is never natural, it's a poisoned state.

HUGUENAU: Well, well, I can remember occasions when you were quite willing to take a glass or two over the score … for instance … well, may I mention the Palatine Tavern, Herr Esch? … besides (*he regards* ESCH *attentively*) you don't strike me as being so free from poison as all that.

MAJOR: Your attacks on our friend Esch are very regrettable, Herr Huguenau.

ESCH: Don't mind him, Herr Major, he's not in earnest.

HUGUENAU: Yes, I am in earnest … I always say straight out what I think … our friend Esch is a wolf in sheep's clothing … yes, I stick to that … and, by your leave, he has his little orgies in private.

ESCH (*contemptuously*): No wine has ever upset my applecart yet.…

HUGUENAU: That's you all over, Herr Esch, trying to keep sober so that you don't give yourself away.

ESCH: … now and then I may take a drop too much, yes, and then the world becomes so simple that you would think it was made of nothing but truth … as simple as in a dream … simple and yet brazenly full of false names … the right names for things aren't to be found.…

HUGUENAU: You'd better drink consecrated wine, then you'd soon find those names of yours … or the future Socialist State, if that's what you're after.

MAJOR: One shouldn't blaspheme even in jest … even wine and bread are symbols of the divine.

(HUGUENAU *notices his mistake and reddens.*)

FRAU ESCH: Oh, Herr Major, it's always like this when Herr Huguenau and my husband are together … chaff may be a sign of friendship, but sometimes it's really past endurance, the way he drags in the mud everything that is holy to my poor husband.

HUGUENAU: Holy! Pure sham! (*He has once more regained his composure and ceremoniously relights his cigar which has gone out.*)

ESCH (*possessed by his train of thought*): The truth that comes to you in dreams walks on crutches … (*he strikes on the table*) the whole world goes on crutches … a hobbling monstrosity …

HUGUENAU (*interested):* An invalid?

ESCH: … if there is even one single error in the world, if at any point at all the false passes for true, then … yes, then the whole world is false … then everything becomes unreal … diabolically conjured away.…

HUGUENAU: Abracadabra, it's gone.…

MAJOR (*without paying any attention to* HUGUENAU): NO, friend Esch, it's the opposite way about: there need be only one righteous man among a thousand sinners …

HUGUENAU: … the great magician Esch.…

ESCH (*rudely):* What do you know about magic? (*shouts at him*) I should think you're more like a conjurer, a juggler, a knife-thrower.…

HUGUENAU: Herr Esch, you are in company, remember yourself.

ESCH (*more calmly*): Magic and juggling are devil's work, they're the real evil, they make the confusion still worse …

MAJOR: Where knowledge fails, that is where evil begins.…

ESCH: … but first the man must come who will blot out every error and bring order, who will take upon him the sacrificial death, that the world may be redeemed to a new innocence, so that from the dead new life may arise.…

MAJOR: The one who will take the penance upon him … (*with assurance*) but He has already come: it was He who destroyed false

knowledge and drove out the magicians …

ESCH: … the darkness still remains, and in the darkness the world is collapsing … nailed to the cross and in the hour of final loneliness pierced by the spear.…

HUGUENAU: Hm, very unpleasant.

MAJOR: A dreadful darkness was round Him, a half-light of heavy uncertainty, and no one approached Him in His loneliness to help Him … yet He took man's sin upon Him, He redeemed the world from sin …

ESCH: … there has been nothing until now but murder and counter-murder, and order will only come when we awaken.…

MAJOR: We must take the penance upon us, we must be awakened out of our sin …

ESCH: … nothing is decided yet, we are still in prison and we must wait …

MAJOR: … we are encompassed by sin, and our light is darkness …

ESCH: … we are waiting for the Judgment, we still have a respite and can still begin a new life … evil has not yet triumphed …

MAJOR: … when we are delivered from the darkness, delivered by grace … then evil will vanish as if it had never been …

ESCH: … like an evil magic, a corrupt magic …

MAJOR: … evil is always outside the world, outside its frontiers: only the man who steps over the world's frontiers and steps out of the truth can fall into the abyss of evil.

ESCH: … we are standing on the edge of the abyss … on the edge of the dark gully …

HUGUENAU: That's too deep for us, what, Frau Esch?

(FRAU ESCH *smooths her hair back, then lays a finger on her lips as a sign to* HUGUENAU *to be silent.*)

ESCH: Many must still die, many must sacrifice themselves, so that room may be made for the son who shall build the house anew … only then will the mists thin away and the new life will come, radiant and innocent.

MAJOR: The evil we see is only an illusion, it takes many shapes, but it is never really there itself … a symbol of nothingness—only divine grace is real.

HUGUENAU (*who does not intend to be relegated to the part of a silent listener):* Well, if robbery or child-rape or desertion or embezzlement are only illusions, it's a very cheerful outlook.

MAJOR: Evil is non-existent … divine grace has redeemed the world from evil.

ESCH: The harder the tribulation, the deeper the darkness, the sharper the whizzing knives, the nearer is the kingdom of redemption.

MAJOR: Only the good is real and true … there is only one sin: not to desire the good, not to desire knowledge, not to have good-will.…

HUGUENAU (*eagerly):* Yes, Herr Major, that's right … myself for instance, I'm certainly no angel … (*reflectively*) … there's this to be said, in that case one couldn't punish anyone … a deserter, for instance, who had good-will couldn't be shot simply to make an example of him.

ESCH: No one stands so high that he dare judge his fellows, and no one is so depraved that his eternal soul can lose its claim to reverence.

HUGUENAU: Quite right.

MAJOR: The man who desires evil can desire good at the same time, but the man who does not desire good has made divine grace bankrupt … it is the sign of obstinacy, inertia of feeling.

ESCH: It's not a matter of good or bad works.…

HUGUENAU: I beg your pardon, Herr Major, but that doesn't seem quite to fit the case … once I lost six hundred marks in Reutlingen through a man going bankrupt, a tidy sum of money, and why? because the man was mad, he had religious mania, of course I wasn't to know that … and right enough, he was acquitted and stuck in a lunatic asylum. But my money was gone.

ESCH: What do you want to infer from that?

HUGUENAU: Why, there you have a good man, and yet he did evil works … (*grinning*) and if you were to do me in, Herr Esch, you would be acquitted on the plea of religious mania, but if I were to do you in I would lose my head … what do you say to that, Herr Esch, with your sham piety? Hm? (*He glances at the* MAJOR, *seeking approval.*)

MAJOR: The madman is like the dreamer; his truth is a false truth … he curses his own child … nobody can be the mouthpiece of God without suffering for it … he is singled out.…

ESCH: He lives in a false reality … we are all still living in a false reality … by rights we should all be madmen, mad in our loneliness.

HUGUENAU: Yes, but I'll be shot and he won't! I beg your pardon, Herr Major, but that's just where he shows his hypocrisy … (*becoming heated*), ah, merde, la sainte religion et les curés à faire des courbettes auprès de la guillotine, ah, merde, alors.… I'm an enlightened man, but that's a bit too much for me!

MAJOR: Come, come, Herr Huguenau, this Moselle seems to be dangerous to a man of your temperament (HUGUENAU *makes an apologetic gesture*) … to take the penance and the chastisement voluntarily upon us, as we have had to take the war, because we have sinned … that isn't hypocrisy.

ESCH (*absently):* Yes, to take men's sins upon you … in the final hour of loneliness.…

The printing-machine stops: the pounding falls silent; the chirping of the crickets can be heard. A wind stirs the leaves of the fruit-trees. Round the moon a few white irradiated clouds can be seen. In the sudden silence the conversation falls away and ceases.

FRAU ESCH: How good the silence is.

ESCH: Sometimes it seems as if the world were only one huge dreadful machine that never stops … the war and everything … it runs

by laws that we don't understand … impudent self-assured laws, engineers' laws … every man must do what is prescribed for him, without turning his head to right or left … every man is a machine that one can only see from outside, a hostile machine … oh, the machine is the root of evil and the Evil One is the machine. Their order is the void that must come … before Time can begin again.…

MAJOR: Not evil, a symbol of evil.…

ESCH: Yes, a symbol.

HUGUENAU (*listening complacently to the sounds from the printing-shop):* Lindner is putting in fresh paper now.

ESCH (*in sudden fear):* Oh, God, is there no possibility of one human being reaching another? is there no fellowship, is there no understanding? Must every man be nothing but an evil machine to his fellows?

MAJOR (*lays his hand comfortingly on* ESCH'S *arm):* But, Esch …

ESCH: Oh, God, who is there that doesn't think evilly of me?

MAJOR: Anyone who knows you, my son … only knowledge can overcome estrangement.

ESCH (*his hands covering his face):* God, let it be by Thee that I am known.

MAJOR: Only to him who has knowledge will knowledge be given, only he who sows love will reap it.

ESCH (*his hands still clasped before his face):* Since I acknowledge Thee, oh, God, Thou wilt not be angry with me any more, for I am Thy beloved son, rescued by Thee from orphanhood.… He who submits himself to death has found love … only he who flings himself into a dreadful intensification of estrangement and death … will find unity and understanding.

MAJOR: And the divine grace will descend on him and take away his fear, the fear that he is wandering on the earth without meaning or purpose, and must go to the grave unenlightened and helpless and without meaning or purpose.…

ESCH: So knowledge will grow to love, and love to knowledge, and every soul that is chosen as the vessel of grace will be inviolable; uplifted by love to join the communion of souls, where each is inviolable and alone and yet united in knowledge—the highest law of knowledge not to wound a living creature: if I have known Thee, God, then I shall live eternally in Thee.

MAJOR: Let mask fall after mask until your heart
And face are open to the eternal breath.…

ESCH: I will become an empty vessel drained
Of all desire and solace, I will take
The chastisement upon me, plunge myself
In nothingness and die, but oh, the fear
Is terrible!

MAJOR: Fear is the fruitful sign
Of heavenly grace, fear is God's word inscribed
Upon the gate that leads to your salvation,—
Step through.

ESCH: Accept me, Lord, in my great need.
When the fore-dream of death descends upon me,
A wanderer in life's dream, the fear of death
Leaps on me, I am helpless and alone,
And doomed to die alone, forsaken by all.

(HUGUENAU *listens incomprehendingly and* FRAU ESCH *fearfully to her husband's words.*)

MAJOR: YOU are not alone, even though you die alone,
Released from evil, fear will leave you too,
You shall decrease that His will may increase,
And as you are known, so also you shall know
The mighty world arisen and manifest.

ESCH: If I could know Thee, Lord, in love through Him
Who knew me in His love, the waste would turn
Into a garden of eternal light,
Boundless the meads, the sun would never set…

MAJOR: Garden of grace encircling all the world,
Basking in soft spring zephyrs, home where all
Fears shall have ceased.

ESCH: I have been a sinner,
Sinful and evil, evil in conscious fear,
Knowing the false way, skirting the edge of the pit,
Face and hands withered, hounded through wastes and gorges,
Fleeing in terror from the dagger's point,
With at my back Ahasuerus' fear,
And in my feet Ahasuerus' dread,

And in my eyes Ahasuerus' lust
For One whom I have lost time and again,
For One I never saw, One I betrayed
And yet who chose me broken and tempest tossed
In the icy tempest of the starry legions,
And sank His grace into me, where it grew,
Grew to redemption, set me free.…

MAJOR: Oh, be my brother, the brother that I lost,
Be as a brother to me.…

(*The two of them chant in antiphony, somewhat in the style of the Salvation Army. The* MAJOR *in baritone*, HERR ESCH *in bass.*)

Lord God of Sabaoth,
Take, oh, take us to Thine altar,
Bind us all in one firm band,
Lead us on with Thine own hand,
Lord God of Sabaoth,
Guide our feet lest we may falter,
Lead us to the Promised Land,
Lord God of Sabaoth.

(HUGUENAU, *who until now has beaten time on the table, strikes in (tenor)):*
Keep us safe from axe and halter,
Keep us safe from wheel and brand,
Lord God of Sabaoth.

ALL THREE: Lord God of Sabaoth.

FRAU ESCH (*strikes in (no voice at all)):*
Thou hast given me food and shelter,
All is Thine, if Thou command,
Lord God of Sabaoth.

ALL TOGETHER (HUGUENAU *and* ESCH *beating time on the table):*
Lord God of Sabaoth,
Save my soul, my spirit,
Save my soul from utter death,
Let not torment sear it,
Let it be in grace baptized,
Nor in sin be e'er chastised,
Keep it whole in merit,
Fan its spark with Thine own breath,
Till it flame in burning faith,
Lord God of Sabaoth,
Save, oh, save Thou me from death.

(*The* MAJOR *has laid his arm round* ESCH'S *shoulder*, HUGUENAU, *his drumming fists still on the table, now slowly lets them fall. The candles have burned down.* FRAU ESCH *pours the last of the wine into the men's glasses, being careful that each receives the same share; the final tiny residue she pours into her husband's glass. The moon is somewhat overcast, and out of the dark landscape the wind blows more coolly now, as though out of a cellar door. Now too the printing-machine once more resumes its pounding, and* FRAU ESCH *touches her husband's arm):* "Shouldn't we go to bed now?"

TRANSFORMATION

Before ESCH'S *house. The* MAJOR *and* HUGUENAU

Huguenau, jerking his thumb towards the window of the Eschs' bedroom:

"Now they're getting into bed. Esch could very well have stayed with us a little longer … but she knows what she's after.… Hm, will the Herr Major permit me to accompany him for a few steps? A little exercise does one good."

They go through the silent medieval streets. The house entries are like black holes. In one of them, pressed against the door, stand a pair of lovers, from another a dog detaches itself and runs on three legs up the street; at the corner it vanishes. Behind some of the windows a faint light is still burning—but what is happening behind the unlighted ones? perhaps a dead man is lying there, stretched out on his bed, his peaked nose in the air, and the coverlet makes a little tent over his upward-pointing toes. Both the Major and Huguenau gaze up at the windows, and Huguenau would like to ask the Major if he too cannot help

thinking of dead men,—but the Major walks on in silence, almost as though he were troubled; probably his thoughts are with Esch, Huguenau tells himself, and he is indignant that Esch should go to bed with his wife and so trouble the good old chap's mind. But devil take it, why should the Major be troubled at all? he makes friends with Esch on the spot instead of keeping that officious hypocrite at arm's-length! A nice friendship, that, between the two of them, between these two fine gentlemen who evidently have forgotten that without him they would never have met each other; who was it, then, that had a prior right to the Major? and if the Major was troubled now, it served him right. More than that, according to his deserts he should be a good deal more troubled, and along with his beloved Herr Esch the Herr Major ought to suffer richly for his treachery.… Huguenau stopped short—a daring and seductive idea had arisen before him with clairvoyant lucidity: the idea of entering into a new and venturous relation with the Major that would enable him in a manner of speaking to betray Esch, at present lying with his wife, with the Major, and to land the Major himself in a humiliating situation! yes, a brilliant, a promising idea, and Huguenau said:

"The Herr Major will remember my first report in which I described my visit to the ki …" Huguenau clapped his hand over his mouth, "pardon, the public brothel. Herr Esch is sleeping respectably in his matrimonial bed now, but he made one of the party that night, all the same. Since then I've been investigating the matter further, and I think I've found a clue. I would like to have another glance into the place … if the Herr Major is interested in the matter and in, how shall I put it, the most interesting milieu, I would most respectfully suggest that he should make a visit of inspection."

The Major let his gaze run once more over the window fronts, over the house doors, which looked like entries to black cellar-caves, and then, to Huguenau's surprise, he said without further ado: "Let us go."

They turned back, for the house lay in the opposite direction and outside the town. The Major again strode on in silence beside Huguenau, he looked perhaps even more troubled than before, and Huguenau, greatly as he longed for a light and confidential tone, dared not even risk starting a conversation. But a still worse disappointment awaited him: when they reached the house, over whose portal a great red lantern shone, the Major abruptly said "No" and held out his hand. And when Huguenau stared at him dumbfounded, he gave a forced smile: "I think you'd better make your researches by yourself to-night." The old man turned back once more towards the town. Huguenau gazed after him in rage and bitterness; but then he remembered Esch, shrugged his shoulders, and opened the door.

He left the house in less than an hour. His spirits had improved; the fear that had weighed upon him was gone, he had put something right, and although he could not have given it a name, yet he felt definitely that he had retrieved his personality and his clear common sense. The others could do what they liked, they could give him the cold shoulder, he snapped his fingers at them. He stepped out vigorously, a Salvation Army song that he must have heard somewhere came into his mind, and with every step he beat time with his walking-stick on the ground to the words: "Lord God of Sabaoth."

CHAPTER LX

Victory Celebration of "The Moselle Memorial Association" in the beer-hall "Stadthalle" in commemoration of the Battle of Tannenberg

Jaretzki was prowling about in the garden of the "Stadthalle." In the big hall they were dancing. Of course one could dance even lacking an arm, but Jaretzki felt shy. He was glad to find Sister Mathilde standing at one of the doors of the dancing-hall:

"So you're not dancing either, Sister?"

"Of course I'm dancing; shall we have a try, Lieutenant Jaretzki?"

"Until I get that thingummy-jig, that artificial arm, there's nothing much I can do … except drinking and smoking … will you have a cigarette, Sister Mathilde?"

"Why, what are you thinking of? I'm here on duty."

"I see, it's duty that makes you offer to dance. Then duty bids you take pity on a poor one-armed cripple … do sit down and bear me company for a little."

Jaretzki sat down somewhat heavily at the nearest table.

"Do you enjoy all this, Sister?"

"Yes, it's very nice."

"Well, I don't like it."

"But the crowd are enjoying themselves, one mustn't grudge them their pleasure."

"Look here, Sister, perhaps I'm a little muzzy as it is … but that doesn't matter.… I tell you that this war can never stop … or what do you think?"

"Why, it must stop some time or other.…"

“What shall we do with ourselves then, when there’s no more war … when no more cripples are turned out for you to nurse?”

Sister Mathilde considered:

“After the war … well, you know yourself what you’re thinking of doing then. You told me of some job you’ve been offered.…”

“With me it’s different … I’ve been at the Front … I’ve killed people … forgive me, it sounds a bit confused perhaps, but it’s quite clear to me all the same … for me it’s all over … but there are all those others …” he waved his hand towards the garden, “they must all face the music yet … the Russians are supposed to be forming women’s battalions already.…”

“The things you say are quite terrifying, Lieutenant Jaretzki.”

“Me? not at all … I’m finished with the whole business.… I’ll go back home … find myself a wife … night after night the same one … no more philandering … I’m afraid I must be a little drunk, Sister, … but you see it isn’t good for a man to be alone, it isn’t good for a man to be alone … it says so in the Bible. And you think a great deal of the Bible, Sister, what?”

“What do you say, Lieutenant Jaretzki, wouldn’t you like to go back to the hospital now? Some of our people are wanting to leave … you could go with them.…”

She felt his alcoholic breath on her face:

“I tell you this, Sister, that the war can’t stop because every man out there has found himself alone … because one after another, they all find themselves alone … and every man who is all alone must kill some other man … you think I’ve drunk too much, Sister, but you know I can carry a lot … no reason at all for sending me to bed … but it’s true, what I’ve been telling you.”

He got up:

“Funny music, what? … God knows what kind of dancing this is, but shall we watch it for a little?”

Dr Ernst Pelzer, the volunteer from the trench mortar division, ran slap into Huguenau in one of the hall doorways:

“Hey, look out, Herr Grand Master of Ceremonies … you’re a regular whirlwind … chasing the ladies, as usual?”

Huguenau did not listen at all; with beaming importance he indicated two gentlemen in dress-suits who had just come into the garden:

“The Burgomaster has arrived!”

“Aha—flying after higher game … well, good hunting to you, tally-ho! and yoicks! and all the rest of it, my noble sportsman.…”

“Thanks, thanks, Herr Doctor”; Huguenau, who had not heard a word, cried his thanks over his shoulder and was already getting into position for the official speech of welcome.

Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck should really have been sitting at the table of honour. But he did not remain there long.

“Let joy be unconfined,” he said, “we are mercenaries in a conquered town.”

He steered for a group of young girls. He carried his head high, his beard stuck almost horizontally into the air. As he passed Fusilier Kneese, who was leaning, sad and bored, against a tree, he clapped him on the shoulder: “Well, mourning still for your appendix? You’re fine soldiers, I must say, you’re here to get the women with child.… I’m ashamed of such milksops … forward, my lad!”

“Very well, sir,” said Kneese, standing to attention.

Kühlenbeck hooked himself on to Berta Kringel, squeezing her arm to his ribs:

“I’ll dance a round with you all … the one that dances best will get a kiss.”

The girls shrieked. Berta Kringel tried to free herself. But when he enclosed her stub-fingered hand in his soft masculine fist, he felt her fingers growing weak and nestling into his.

“So you won’t dance … you’re all afraid of me, that’s what it is … all right, I’ll take you over to the tombola … children like to play at such games.”

Lisbeth Wöger cried:

“You’re only poking fun at us again, Herr Kühlenbeck … a Surgeon-Major doesn’t dance.”

“Well, Lisbeth, you’ll come to know me better yet.”

And Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck captured Lisbeth too by the arm.

While they were standing at the tombola-table, Frau Paulsen the wife of the apothecary Paulsen approached, took her stand beside Dr Kühlenbeck, and whispered with pale lips:

“Aren’t you ashamed … with these callow creatures.…”

The huge man gazed at her a little apprehensively from behind his glasses; then he laughed;

“Oh, dear lady, I promise the first prize to you.”
“Thanks,” said Frau Paulsen, taking herself off.
Lisbeth Wöger and Berta stuck their heads together:
“Did you see how green she was with jealousy?”

Although Heinrich’s presence had to a certain degree broken through her hermit existence, Hanna Wendling had not come to the celebration willingly. But as one of the town’s prominent citizens and also as an officer, Advocate Wendling had felt it his duty to attend. So they had driven over with Röders.

They sat in the dancing-hall; Dr Kessel kept them company. At the upper end of the room stood the table of honour, gleaming with napery and decked with flowers and festoons of leaves; there presided the Burgomaster and the Major, and Herr Editor Huguenau had also his place there. When he caught sight of the newcomers he steered his way across to them. That he was on the committee could be seen from the badge in his buttonhole, but still more clearly was it written on his brow. No one could fail to remark Herr Huguenau’s dignity. Huguenau had known of course for a long time who this lady was: he had noticed her several times in the town, and a very little inquiry had discovered that she was Frau Advocate Wendling.

He made straight for Dr Kessel:
“May I beg you, Herr Doctor, to do me the great favour of introducing me to your friends?”
“Yes, with pleasure.”
“A great honour, a great honour,” said Herr Huguenau, “a great privilege; the gracious lady lives in such retirement, and if it were not for the great good fortune of her husband being here on furlough I feel sure that we wouldn’t have had the pleasure of welcoming her in our midst to-night.”
The war had made her rather shy of people, replied Hanna Wendling.
“That’s the wrong way to take it, dear lady. It’s just in such grave times that one needs cheering up.… I hope that you’re both staying for the dance.”
“No, my wife is a little tired, so unfortunately we must go soon.”
Huguenau was honestly hurt:
“But, Herr Advocate, you and your charming wife must really grant us the honour for once, our festivities really must be graced by such a beautiful lady … and it’s for a philanthropic object, so won’t the Herr Lieutenant close one eye and put mercy before justice?”
And although Frau Hanna Wendling was perfectly aware of the shallowness of these flatteries, her face opened and she said:
“Well, as a favour to you, Herr Editor, we’ll stay for a little longer.”

In the middle of the garden a long table had been set up for the soldiers, and “The Moselle Memorial” had presented them with a small cask of beer, which stood on its two trestles beside the table. The beer had been finished long ago, but a few of the men still loitered round the empty table. Kneese had joined them, and now he was drawing designs with a finger-tip in the pools of beer on the wooden boards:

“The Surgeon-Major says that we’re to give them children.”
“Who?”
“The girls here.”
“Tell him he must lead the way.”
Guffaws.
“He’s doing that as it is.”
“It would be more sense if he let us go home to our wives.”
The lamps swayed in the night wind.

Jaretzki wandered alone through the garden. When he met Frau Paulsen he bowed:

“So lonely, dear lady?”
Frau Paulsen said:
“You seem to be lonely too, Herr Lieutenant.”
“Doesn’t mean anything in my case, I’m finished with everything.”
“Come, shall we try our luck at the tombola, Herr Lieutenant?” Frau Paulsen attached herself to Jaretzki’s sound right arm.

Huguenau met Surgeon-Major Kühlenbeck walking with Lisbeth and Berta under the trees.

Huguenau exclaimed in greeting:
“A happy evening, Herr Surgeon-Major, a happy evening, young ladies.”
And he was gone.

Dr Kühlenbeck was still holding stub-fingered bourgeoise hands in his great warm paws:
"Well, do you like that elegant young fellow?"
"No …" the two girls tittered.
"Indeed? Why not?"
"There's others better than him."
"I see. Who, for instance?"
Berta said:
"There's Lieutenant Jaretzki walking with Frau Paulsen over there."
"Leave them to themselves," said the Surgeon-Major. "I'm going to stick to you."

The band blew a flourish. Huguenau stood beside the conductor on the platform, which on one side projected into the hall, on the other, in the form of a pavilion, into the garden.

Making a speaking trumpet with his hands, Huguenau shouted over the tables standing in the garden:
"Silence."
In the garden and the hall there was dead silence.
"Silence," crowed Huguenau once more into the stillness.
Captain von Schnaack of Room VI.—he had a shot wound in the lung which was now healed—stepped up beside Huguenau on the platform and now unfolded a sheet of paper:
"Victory at Amiens. 3700 English prisoners, 3 enemy aeroplanes shot down, two of them by Captain Blöcke, who thus achieves his twenty-third air victory."
Captain von Schnaack raised his arm: "Hip, hip, hooray!" The band struck up the national anthem. All rose to their feet; the most of them joined in the singing. When it had died away again, someone shouted from a shadowy corner:
"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah, long live the war!"
Everybody turned and looked.
There sat Lieutenant Jaretzki. A bottle of champagne was standing before him, and he was trying to embrace Frau Paulsen with his sound arm.

The walls of the dancing-hall were decorated with portraits of the allied generals and rulers decked with oak-leaves and paper garlands and hung with banners. The patriotic and ceremonious part of the celebration was now over, and Huguenau could dedicate himself to pleasure. He had always been a good dancer, had always been able to flatter himself that in spite of his stoutness and short stature he cut a good figure; but to-night more was at stake, to-night more was in question than the elasticity and agility of a stout little man; here under the eyes of the military commanders the dance became a celebration of victory.

The dancer is removed beyond the reach of this world. Wrapped in the music, he has renounced his freedom of action, and yet acts in accordance with a higher and more lucid freedom. In the rigorous security of the rhythm that guides him he is safely sheltered, and a great relief comes to him from that security. Thus music brings unity and order into the confusion and chaos of life. Cancelling Time it cancels death, and yet resurrects it anew in every beat of the rhythm, even in the rhythm of that dreary and endless potpourri which, calling itself *A Selection of Music from All Countries*, is now being played, and consists of a particoloured assortment of German folk-songs and enemy dances such as the cake-walk, the matchiche and the tango. The dancer's partner hums, then, growing more ardent, she sings. And her emotional and unschooled voice sings the barbarous words of these melodies, all of which she knows without exception, her soft zephyr-like breath brushing his cheek when he bends over her in the tango. But soon he straightens himself again, his warlike spirit reawakened he gazes fixedly and sternly through his eyeglasses, gazes into the distance, and dauntlessly he and his partner defy hostile powers when the music breaks triumphantly into an heroic march; but now with the changing rhythm they fall into the artful contortions of the one-step, and shuffle with curious swayings on one spot, almost without progressing, until the long waves of the tango once more roll up and their movements once more become catlike and soft, with a yielding suppleness of leg and body. Should they pass the table of honour, behind whose flower-filled vases the Major sits side by side with the Burgomaster, then with a sweep of the arm the dancer snatches up a glass from the board—for he himself belongs to this table—and without interrupting the dance, like a tight-rope dancer who carelessly and smilingly devours a succulent meal while still high up in the air, he drinks to the seated company.

He scarcely guides his partner now; one hand, gallantly enveloped in his pocket-handkerchief, rests delicately beneath the low-cut back of her dress, but his left arm hangs carelessly by his side. Only when the music changes over to a waltz do they join their free hands; stiffly, in reciprocal tension, they brace their outstretched arms, and with their fingers locked the pair whirl round the hall. Glancing round the hall,

he sees that the ranks of dancers have thinned. Only one other pair is still dancing, they come nearer, almost brush him, recede, glide away again along the walls. The others have withdrawn among the spectators; unequal to the alien dance rhythms, they stand and admire. Should the music cease, the spectators and dancers alike clap their hands, and it begins once more. It is almost like a trial of strength. Huguenau scarcely sees his partner, who with head flung back in surrender has resigned herself to his strong and yet hardly visible guidance; he does not know that the music has released in his partner a more delicate and disciplined artistry of sex, a bacchantic feminine power which will remain for ever unknown to her husband, to her lover, even to herself, nor does he see the ecstatic smile with which the other lady hangs in her partner's arms; he sees only his rival, sees only the other hostile dancer, a lean wine-agent in evening clothes with a black tie and an Iron Cross on his chest, who in elegance and military distinction outshines himself in his plain blue suit. So might Esch himself, with his long lank limbs, dance here, and therefore, to filch the lady from him, Huguenau holds her with his eye as she glides past with her partner, and he keeps on doing this until she returns his gaze, gives herself to him with her glances, so that he, Wilhelm Huguenau, now possesses both the women, possesses them without desiring them, for it is not the favour of women that matters to him, though he may be competing for it now—the pleasures of love do not matter to him; on the contrary this celebration and this spacious hall concentrate ever more exclusively around the white-decked table over there, and his thoughts are directed more and more unconditionally on the Major who sits, white-bearded and beautiful, behind the flowers watching him, him, Wilhelm Huguenau in the middle of the floor; he is a warrior dancing before his chieftain.

But the Major's eyes were filling with growing horror. This hall with these two men shamelessly shuffling, shamelessly hopping, more shameless even than the women with whom they were coupled; it was like a house of ill fame, it was the pit of corruption itself. And that a war could be accompanied by such celebrations of victory turned war itself into a bloody caricature of corruption. It was as though the world were becoming featureless, featureless every face, a pit where nothing could be distinguished, a pit from which there was no longer any rescue. Seized with horror, Major von Pasenow caught himself wishing that he, a Prussian officer, could tear the banners from the walls, not because they were desecrated by the festive abominations, but because they were incomprehensibly bound up with these abominations and this diabolical display, in an incomprehensibility behind which all the unchivalry of unchivalrous weapons, treacherous friends and broken pledges was concealed. And as he sat in a strange icy immobility, the dreadful desire arose in him to destroy this demoniacal rabble, to exterminate them, to see them lying crushed at his feet. But motionless and gigantic as a towering mountain range, as the shadow of a mountain range on the wall, there rose grave and solemn above the rabble the image of a friend, perhaps it was that of Esch, and to Major von Pasenow it seemed that it must be for this friend's sake that the Evil One had to be crushed and cast into nothingness. Major von Pasenow longed for his brother.

Sister Mathilde was searching for Dr Kühlenbeck. She found him among a crowd of prominent business men. Kringel the merchant, Quint the hotelkeeper and pork-butcher, Herr Salzer the architect, and Herr Westrich the postmaster, were all sitting there. And their wives and daughters were sitting beside them.

"A moment, Herr Surgeon-Major."

"Another woman that's cocked her eye at me."

"Just one moment, sir."

Kühlenbeck got up:

"What's wrong, my child?"

"We must get Lieutenant Jaretzki out of here.…"

"Yes, I fancy he's had about enough."

Sister Mathilde smiled in agreement.

"I'll come and see to him."

Jaretzki's sound arm was lying on the table, his head was resting on it, and he was asleep.

The Surgeon-Major looked at his watch:

"Flurschütz is relieving me. He should be arriving at any moment now with the car. He can take Jaretzki back with him."

"Can we leave him here asleep like this, sir?"

"There's nothing else for it. War is war."

Dr Flurschütz blinked through somewhat inflamed eyes at the lighted garden. Then he went into the dancing-hall. The Major and the other guests of honour had already left. The long table had been removed and the whole room set free for the dancing, which proceeded on its crowded, steaming, sweating, shuffling course.

It was some time before he caught sight of his chief; with grave expression and upward-pointing beard Kühlenbeck was revolving with Frau Chemist Paulsen in a waltz. Flurschütz waited for the dance to end, and then he reported himself.

"Well, here at last, Flurschütz: you see what childish follies you have driven your worthy superior officer to with your lateness … but now there's no excuse for you; when the chief dances, the next in command must dance too."

"Insubordination, sir, I refuse to dance."

"And this is the younger generation … it seems to me that I'm younger than the lot of you … but now I must go, I'll send the car back for you. Bring Jaretzki with you; he's blind to the world for the moment … one of the sisters will return with me, you bring the other."

In the garden he unearthed Sister Carla:

"Sister Carla, I'll take you back with me, I can manage four wounded men too. Round them up, will you, but be quick."

Then he packed in his passengers. Three men were got into the back seat, Sister Carla and another man in the front seat, and he himself took his place beside the chauffeur. Seven crutches stared into the dark air (the eighth lay somewhere in the car), stars hung in the black tent of the sky. The air smelt of petrol and dust. But from time to time, particularly at the turns of the roads, one felt the nearness of the woods.

Lieutenant Jaretzki got up. He had a feeling as though he had fallen asleep in a railway carriage. Now the train was stopping at one of the bigger stations; Jaretzki resolved to visit the buffet. There were a great many people and a great many lights on the platform. "Sunday traffic" Jaretzki told himself. He had got quite cold. Round about the region of the stomach. Something warm would do him good. Suddenly his left arm was missing. Must have left it lying on the luggage-rack. He steered his way through tables and people. At the tombola counter he halted.

"A grog," he commanded.

"It's a good thing that you're here," said Sister Mathilde to Dr Flurschütz, "it won't be an easy job to deal with Jaretzki to-night."

"We'll manage it all right, Sister … enjoyed yourself?"

"Oh yes, it was quite jolly."

"Isn't it a little spectral to you too, Sister?"

Sister Mathilde tried to understand, and did not answer.

"Well, could you have pictured anything like this to yourself years ago?"

"It reminds me somewhat of our annual fair."

"A somewhat hysterical fair."

"Well, perhaps, Dr Flurschütz."

"Empty forms that still live … looks like a fair, but the people in it don't know any longer what's happening to them."

"It will all soon come right again, Herr Doctor."

She stood before him, straight and sound.

Flurschütz shook his head:

"Nothing has ever come right yet … least of all on the Judgment Day … doesn't this look a little bit like it? what?"

"The ideas you have, Doctor!… but we must get our patients together."

The volunteer Dr Pelzer caught up Jaretzki in his wandering course near the music pavilion.

"You seem to be looking for something badly, Herr Lieutenant."

"Yes, a grog."

"That's a famous idea, Herr Lieutenant, winter is coming, I'll fetch you a grog … but sit down … until I get it." He rushed away and Jaretzki sat down on a table, swinging his legs.

Dr Wendling and his wife, just leaving, passed by. Jaretzki saluted: "Allow me, Herr Lieutenant, I'm Second Lieutenant Jaretzki, Hessian Light Infantry Battalion No. 8, Army of the Crown Prince, lost left arm as result of gas-poisoning at Armentières, beg to introduce myself."

Wendling looked at him in astonishment:

"Delighted," he said. "Lieutenant Dr Wendling."

"Diploma engineer Otto Jaretzki," Jaretzki now felt obliged to add, this time standing to attention before Hanna, so as to show that the introduction also included her.

Hanna Wendling had already encountered a great deal of admiration during the evening. She said

graciously:

"But that's horrible, about your arm."

"Quite right, gracious lady, horrible but just."

"Come, come, Herr Comrade," said Wendling, "one can't talk of justice in such things."

Jaretzki raised one finger:

"It isn't legal justice that I mean, Herr Comrade … we've been given a new kind of justice, a man doesn't need so many members when he's alone … you'll agree with that, I'm sure, gracious lady."

"Good-evening," said Wendling.

"A pity, a horrible pity," said Jaretzki, "but of course everyone is pledged to his loneliness … good-evening." And he returned to his table again.

"Queer man," said Hanna Wendling.

"Drunken fool," replied her husband.

The volunteer Pelzer passing with two glasses of grog stood to attention.

Huguenau hurried out of the ballroom. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and tucked his handkerchief inside his collar.

Sister Mathilde stopped him:

"Herr Huguenau, you could help us by gathering the patients together."

"A great honour, gracious lady, shall I order a flourish to be blown?"—and he turned at once towards the band.

"No, no, Herr Huguenau, I don't want any fuss, we can manage without that."

"As you please … been a splendid evening, hasn't it, gracious lady? The Herr Major has expressed his pleasure in the most gracious terms."

"Certainly, a lovely evening."

"The Herr Surgeon-Major seemed to be very pleased too … he was in splendid spirits … may I beg you to give him my humble regards … he left us so suddenly that I couldn't see him off."

"I wonder, Herr Huguenau, if you would let the soldiers in the ballroom know that Dr Flurschütz and myself are waiting for them at the door."

"It shall be done, it shall be done at once … but it isn't right of you, gracious lady, to leave us so soon … not a sign, I hope, that you haven't enjoyed yourself … well then, I shan't regard it as that."

His handkerchief tucked inside his collar, Huguenau hastened back into the ballroom.

"What about the officers, Sister?" asked Flurschütz.

"Oh, we don't need to bother about them, they've made arrangements themselves for being driven back."

"Good, then everything seems to be coming right after all … but we've still got Jaretzki on our shoulders."

Jaretzki and Dr Pelzer were still sitting in the garden beneath the music pavilion. Jaretzki was trying to look at the illuminations through his brown grog-glass.

Flurschütz sat down beside them:

"How about going to bed, Jaretzki?"

"I'll go to bed if I can find a woman, if I can't find a woman I won't go to bed … the whole thing began with the men going to bed without women and the women going to bed without men … that was a bad arrangement."

"He's right there," said the volunteer.

"Possibly," said Flurschütz, "and that's only occurred to you now, Jaretzki?"

"Yes, this very moment … but I've known it for a long time."

"Well, you'll certainly save the world with that idea."

"It would be enough if he saved Germany," said the volunteer Pelzer.

"Germany …" said Flurschütz, looking round the empty garden.

"Germany …" said Pelzer, "when it began I volunteered straight off for the Front … now I'm glad to be sitting here."

"Germany …" said Jaretzki, who had begun to weep, "too late …" he wiped his eyes, "Flurschütz, you're a nice fellow, I love you."

"That's good of you, I love you too … shall we go home now?"

"We haven't a home to go to, Flurschütz … I'll have a shot at getting married."

"It's too late for that too, at this time of day, I fancy," said the volunteer.

"Yes, it's rather late, Jaretzki," said Flurschütz.

"It's never too late for that," bawled Jaretzki, "but you've cut it off, you swine."

“Come, Jaretzki, it really is time now that you wakened up.”

“If you cut mine off, I’ll cut yours off … that’s why the war must go on for ever … have you ever tried to do it with a hand-grenade …?” he nodded gravely, “… now I, I have … fine eggs, the hand-grenades … rotten eggs.”

Flurschütz took him under the arm:

“Well, Jaretzki, probably you’re quite right … yes, and probably it’s actually the only way left of coming to a mutual understanding … but now come along, my friend.”

At the outside door the soldiers were already assembled round Sister Mathilde.

“Pull yourself together, Jaretzki,” said Flurschütz.

“Righto!” said Jaretzki, and as he appeared before Sister Mathilde he straightened himself to attention and reported: “A lieutenant, a medical officer and fourteen men present … I beg to report that he has cut it off …” he made a short pause for effect, and then drew the empty sleeve out of his pocket and waved it to and fro under Sister Mathilde’s long nose: “Chaste and empty.”

Sister Mathilde cried:

“Those who want to drive back can do so; I am going on foot with the others.”

Huguenau came rushing out:

“I hope everything has gone all right, gracious lady, and that we’re all here … may I wish you a safe journey home?”

He shook hands with Sister Mathilde, with Dr Flurschütz, with Lieutenant Jaretzki, and with each of the fourteen soldiers, being careful to introduce himself in each case as “Huguenau.”

CHAPTER LXI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (10)

What really do I want of Marie? I invite her here, I ask her to sing, I couple her in all chastity with Nuchem, the Talmudist, the renegade Talmudist, I suppose I should say, and I let her go away again, let her disappear within the walls of her grey hostel. What do I want of her? and why does she lend herself to this game? is she resolved to save my soul, is she resolved to take on the endless, the ultimately impossible task of capturing the Talmudist soul of this Jew and leading it to Jesus? What does Nuchem think about it anyway? Here I am with these two human beings apparently in the hollow of my hand, and yet I know nothing about them, not even what they are thinking and what they will eat this evening; man is such an isolated creature that nobody, not even God Who created him, knows anything about him.

The whole thing disturbed me extraordinarily, especially as I had never been able to look upon Marie except as a creature filled to the brim with hymns and Bible texts, and in my uneasiness I set out for the hostel.

I had to go there twice before I found her. She was out on a round of sick-visiting, and did not return until the evening. So I sat and waited in the common-room, contemplated the Bible texts on the walls, contemplated the portrait of General Booth, and once more considered all the various possibilities. I recalled to my mind my first meeting with Marie, also her first chance encounter with Nuchem, I made myself visualize everything that had happened since, I impressed all this very thoroughly on my mind, not even excepting my situation at the moment; I examined the common-room with the greatest attention, walking about in the slowly increasing dusk, for the sky had darkened; outside heavy raindrops were falling, hastening the twilight. I asked myself whether the two old men who were also sitting in the room like myself were to be included in my memory, and I included them—best to make certain. They were very feeble, their thoughts were impenetrable, I was empty air to them.

It was quite late when Marie arrived. Meanwhile the two old men had been led out, and I had been almost afraid that I would be treated in the same way. In the barely lit room she did not recognize me at once; she said: “God send you His blessing,” and I responded: “That is only a symbolic figure of speech.” Recognizing me now she replied on her side: “It isn’t a figure of speech, may God send you His blessing.” Now I said for my part: “With us Jews everything is a symbol.” Thereupon she replied: “You aren’t a Jew.” To which I answered: “The bread and the wine are only symbols, none the less; besides, I live among Jews.” She said: “The Lord is our eternal home.” That was completely in character, that was just as I had imagined it to myself, a sacred text for every eventuality; now she was delivered once more into my hand, and raising my voice I said: “I forbid you ever to enter my Jewish home again,” but it had an empty sound in that place. I must have her in my flat again, it seemed, if I was to talk reasonably to her; so I laughed and said: “A joke of mine, *nebbich*, a joke.” Yet though with that Yiddish word I may have been seeking to take refuge from my own speech in that of an alien, an utterly alien people, and to shelter myself under the ægis of a God alien to me, it was of no avail, I did not recover my assurance. It may be that I was really too broken

by my long wait, grown old like the two old men who had finally been led out of the waiting-room; I had been humiliated by my wait, a creature instead of a creator, a disthroned God. Almost humbly I had to bring out: “I wanted to save you from scandal, Dr Litwak has been pointing out the danger to me.” Now that was of course a distortion of the case, for Litwak had feared the danger simply for Nuchem’s sake. And to call in such a ridiculous half-baked Freethinker as a confederate! truly I could not have given a more painful wound to my self-respect. And simple as was the retort which she found in reply, it was a reproof: “When your heart is filled with the joy of the Lord, you’re safe from scandal.” My patience gave under this humiliation, and I did not notice that now I was actually serving the old grandfather’s and Dr Litwak’s purposes: “You mustn’t carry on any more with the young Jew; he has a fat wife and a swarm of children.” Oh, could I have read in her soul, could I have known whether with these words I had hurt and wounded her, torn that heart which gave out that it was filled with the joy of the Lord,—but there was no sign of that, perhaps she had not even understood what I said. She merely said: “I’ll come to see you. We’ll sing together.” I acknowledged myself beaten. “We can go now,” I said with a last remnant of hope that I might still manage to decide her course. She replied: “I would love to, but I must go back to my sick patients.”

So I was compelled to set off for home again with everything still unsettled. Only a soft rain was falling now. In front of me marched a very young pair of lovers; they were clasping each other and their free arms swung to the rhythm of their march.

CHAPTER LXII

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (8)

Religions arise out of sects and in their decadence lapse again into sects, returning to their original status before falling into complete dissolution. At the beginning of the Christian era there were the several Christ- and Mithras-cults, at its close we find the grotesque American sects and the Salvation Army.

Protestantism was the first great sect-formation in the decay of Christianity. A sect, not a new religion. For it lacked the most important characteristic of a new religion, that new theology which binds together into a new harmony the new experience of God and a new cosmogony. Protestantism, by its very nature undeductive and untheological, refused to venture beyond the sphere of the autonomous inward religious experience.

Kant’s attempt to establish a retrospective Protestant theology did indeed wrestle with the task of transferring the substance of religious Platonism to the new positivistic science, but it was far from seeking to set up a universal theological canon of values on the Catholic pattern.

The defence of Catholicism against a progressive disintegration into sects was organized by the Jesuits of the Counter-reformation in a draconic, even a military, centralization of values. That was the time when even the survivals of heathenish folk-customs were pressed into the service of the Church, when folk-art received its Catholic colouring, when the Church of the Jesuits blossomed into an unheard-of splendour, aspiring towards and achieving an ecstatic unity which was no longer, indeed, the mystic symbolical unity of the Gothic, but none the less was its heroic-romantic counterpart.

Protestantism has had to dispense with that kind of defence against sectarianism. It does not absorb the non-religious values, it only tolerates them. It despises extraneous “aids,” for its asceticism insists on the radical inwardness of religious experience. And although it acknowledges ecstasy to be the source and the crown of religion, yet it exacts that the ecstatic value shall be independently wrested from the sphere of pure religion, remaining absolutely uncontaminated, uncompromised, and autonomous.

This attitude of severity is what governs the relationship of Protestantism to the non-religious social values, and what it depends on also to ensure its own stability as a Church on earth. In its exclusive and single-minded devotion to God it must of necessity fall back on the sole extant emanation of God’s spirit on earth, the Holy Scriptures,—and so fidelity to the Scripture becomes the highest earthly duty of the Protestant, and all the radicality, all the severity of the Protestant method is applied to maintaining it.

The most characteristically Protestant idea is the categorical imperative of duty. It is in complete opposition to Catholicism: the extraneous values of life are neither subsumed in a creed nor included in a theological canon, but are merely strictly and somewhat bleakly supervised on the authority of Scripture.

If Protestantism had chosen to follow the other line of development, the Catholic, in order to achieve in

its turn an organic system of Protestant values, such as Leibniz envisaged, for example, it would perhaps have preserved itself not less successfully than Catholicism against a further splitting-up into sects; but it would have been compelled to lose its essential character. It found itself—and still finds itself—in the situation of a revolutionary party that runs the danger, once it has risen to power, of being forced to identify itself with the old order it has been opposing. The reproach of disguised Catholicism levelled against Leibniz was not quite without foundation.

There is no severity that may not be a mask for fear. But the fear of lapsing into sectarianism would be much too insignificant a motive to account for the severity of Protestantism. And the flight to punctilious fidelity, to the written word, is pregnant with the fear of God, that fear which comes to light in Luther's *pœnitentia*, that "absolute" fear of the "ruthlessness" of the Absolute which Kierkegaard experienced and in which God "is enthroned in sorrow."

It is as if Protestantism by clinging to the Scripture wished to preserve the last faint echoes of God's Word in a world that has fallen silent, a world where only things speak dumbly, a world delivered over to the silence and ruthlessness of the Absolute,—and in his fear of God the Protestant has realized that it is his own goal before which he cowers. For in excluding all other values, in casting himself in the last resort on an autonomous religious experience, he has assumed a final abstraction of a logical rigour that urges him unambiguously to strip all sensory trappings from his faith, to empty it of all content but the naked Absolute, retaining nothing but the pure form, the pure, empty and neutral form of a "religion in itself," a "mysticism in itself."

There is a striking correspondence between this process and the structure of the Jewish religion: perhaps the Jews have carried to a still more advanced stage the neutralization of religious experience, the stripping of all emotional and sensory elements from mysticism, the elimination of the "external" aids to ecstasy; perhaps they have already got as near to the coldness of the Absolute as the ordinary man can bear—but they too have preserved the utmost rigour and severity of the Law as the last vestige of a bond with religious life on the earthly plane.

This correspondence in the process of intensification, this correspondence in the form of religious structure, which is asserted to extend even to the point of causing a corresponding similarity of character between orthodox Jews and Swiss Calvinists or British Puritans, this correspondence could, of course, be attributed also to a certain similarity in the external circumstances of these religions: Protestantism being a revolutionary movement, and the Jews an oppressed minority; they are both in opposition; and it could even be alleged that Catholicism itself when driven into a minority, as for instance in Ireland, exhibits the same characteristics. Yet a Catholicism of that stamp has as little in common with the Catholicism of Rome as the original Protestant faith has with the Romanizing tendencies of the High Church. They have simply inverted their distinguishing signs. And however these empiric facts are expounded, their explanatory value is but little, since the facts would not be available at all were it not for the determining religious experience behind them.

Is it this radical religiosity, dumb and stripped of ornament, this conception of an infinity conditioned by severity and by severity alone, that determines the style of our new epoch? Is this ruthlessness of the divine principle a symptom of the infinite recession of the focus of plausibility? Is this immolation of all sensory content to be regarded as the root-cause of the prevailing disintegration of values? Yes.

The Jew, by virtue of the abstract rigour of his conception of infinity, is the really modern, the most "advanced" man *kat' exochen:* he it is who surrenders himself with absolute radicality to whatever system of values, whatever career he has chosen; he it is who raises his profession, even though it be a means of livelihood taken up by chance, to a hitherto unknown absolute pitch; he it is who, unconditionally and ruthlessly following up his actions without reference to any other system of values, attains the highest summit of spiritual enlightenment or sinks to the most brutal absorption in material things: in good as in evil a creature of extremes—it looks as though the current of the absolute Abstract which for two thousand years has flowed through the ghettoes like an almost imperceptible trickle beside the great river of life should now become the main stream; it is as if the radicality of Protestant thought had inflamed to virulence all the dread ruthlessness of abstraction which for two thousand years had been sheltered by insignificance and reduced to its minimum, as if it had released that absolute power of indefinite extension which inheres potentially in the pure Abstract alone, released it explosively to shatter our age and transform the hitherto unregarded warden of abstract thought into the paradigmatic incarnation of our

disintegrating epoch.

Apparently a Christian can only decide between two alternatives: either to seek the still available protection of the Catholic harmony of values, in the literally motherly bosom of the Church, or courageously to accept the absolute Protestantism which involves abasement before an abstract God,—and wherever this decision has not been taken, fear of the future lies like an oppression. And in fact it is the case that in all countries where men are still undecided this fear is latent and constantly active, though it may find expression merely in a fear of the Jews, whose spirit and mode of living are felt, if not recognized, to be a hateful image of the future.

In the idea of a Protestant organon of values there certainly exists a desire for the reunion of all Christian churches, the kind of reunion envisaged by Leibniz, and that Leibniz, who comprehended completely the values of his age, was bound to think of it can now be seen as almost inevitable; but it was equally inevitable that a man like him, a man centuries ahead of his time, who foresaw the *lingua universalis* of logic, must have also envisaged in that final reunion the abstraction of a *religio universalis*, an abstraction of a coldness that perhaps he alone was capable of enduring, being as he was the most profound mystic of Protestantism. But the Protestant line of development postulated first the immolation of life; so it was Kant's philosophy, not Leibniz's, that engendered Protestant theology; and the rediscovery of Leibniz was reserved, significantly enough, for Catholic theologians.

The numerous sects that have split off one after another from Protestantism, and have been treated by it with that ostensible tolerance which is peculiar to every revolutionary movement, have all developed in the same direction; they are all a rehash, a whittling away and levelling down of that old idea of a Protestant organon of values; they are all on the side of the "Counter-reformation": for instance, to leave out of account the grotesque American sects, the Salvation Army not only resembles the Jesuit movement of the Counter-reformation in its military organization, but also exhibits very clearly the same tendency to centralize all values, to draw everything into its net, to show how popular art of every kind, down to the street song, may be reclaimed for religion and reinstated as "ecstatic aids." Pathetic and inadequate expense of spirit.

Pathetic and inadequate expense of spirit, deceptive hope, to think of saving the Protestant idea from the horror of the Absolute. It is a touching cry for help, a cry summoning all the resources of a religious community, even though that may be seen only as the pale reflection of what was once a great fellowship. For at the door in rigid severity stand silence, ruthlessness and neutralization, and the cry for help mounts more and more urgently from the lips of all those who are not capable of accepting what is bound to come.

CHAPTER LXIII

On the Sunday afternoon following the celebration in the Stadthalle, Major von Pasenow, to his own surprise, decided to avail himself of Esch's invitation to visit the Bible class. It came about in the following way: actually he had not been thinking of Esch at all, and what turned the scale was perhaps simply the walking-stick which he suddenly saw leaning in the hall-stand, a walking-stick with a white ivory crook-handle, which in some way had got smuggled in among his other things and evidently must have been hidden until now in some cupboard. Of course he remembered the stick quite well, nevertheless it was strange to him. For a moment it seemed to Major von Pasenow as though he must change into mufti and visit one of those ambiguous pleasure resorts which an officer is not allowed to enter in uniform. And so to speak as a concession, he did not buckle on his sword, but took the stick in his hand and left the hotel. He remained standing hesitatingly for a little in front of the hotel, then set out in the direction of the river. He walked slowly, supporting himself on the stick, somewhat like a wounded or an invalid officer at a health resort,—and he could not help remembering vaguely that the indiarubber bulb at the point of the old stick needed to be replaced. So at a moderate pace he reached the outskirts of the town, and he had the slight agreeable sense of freedom that a man has who can turn back at any moment, like an officer on furlough. And in fact he presently did turn back—it was like a happy and reassuring, yet disconcerting return to one's home—and as though remembering an urgent promise which he had to redeem at once, he took the shortest way to Esch's dwelling.

Since the number of Esch's disciples had increased, and as during the summer months there was no need in any case for a heated room, the meetings were held in one of the empty store-rooms opening on the courtyard. A carpenter who belonged to the circle had provided rude benches; a little table with a chair behind it stood in the middle of the room. As there was no window the door was left open, and the Major,

entering the courtyard, knew at once what direction to take.

Now that the Major appeared framed in the doorway and paused for a little to accustom his eyes to the twilight, everybody stood up; it almost gave the impression of an expected visit of inspection by a superior officer on his rounds, and this impression was strengthened by the uniforms of the soldiers present. This transformation, even though merely figurative, of his unusual situation into the dignified terms of the office to which he was accustomed, mitigated the shock of it for the Major; it was as though a light and yet firm hand had held him back from stepping down dark ways, it was a fleeting intimation of a danger overcome, and he raised his hand in salute.

Esch had sprung up along with the others, and now he escorted the guest to the chair behind the table. He himself remained standing beside it, rather like a guardian angel allotted to the Major. And the Major had somewhat that feeling about it, more, it was as though the object of his visit were already fulfilled, as though he were surrounded by an atmosphere of security, a simplified area of life which was waiting to receive him, the returned wanderer. Even the silence that surrounded him was like an end in itself, it might have endured as it was for ever; no one spoke a word, the room, filled with the silence, strangely emptied by the silence, seemed to extend beyond its own walls, and the yellow sunlight outside the open door flowed past like an eternal immeasurable river on whose banks they were sitting. Nobody knew how long this silent motionless state lasted, it had as it were the frozen timelessness of those seconds when men are faced with death, and although the Major knew that it was Esch who stood beside him, he felt to the full the fraternal presence of death, felt its menace as a sweet support. And when he made to turn round to Esch, it required all the effort which one needs when one awaits something decisive, knowing at the same time that one must maintain one's calm to the very last instant. With a great effort he turned round to him and said: "Please continue."

But nothing at all happened, for Esch gazed down on the Major's white hair-parting, he heard the Major's low voice, and it was as though the Major knew all about him, as though he knew all about the Major, like two friends who know each other well. He and the Major were there as on an uplifted and radiant stage, they were seated in the places of honour, the audience were still as though a bell had commanded silence, and Esch, who dared not lay his hand on the Major's shoulder, leaned on the back of the chair, although that too was undeniably presumptuous. He felt strong, steadfast and firm, as strong as in the best days of his youth, at once secure and gentle, as though he were delivered from all the works of man, as though the room were no longer made of bricks laid one on another, the door no longer of sawn planks of wood, as though all were the work of God and the words in his mouth were God's words.

He opened the Bible and read from the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles:

"And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed.

"And the keeper of the prison awaking out of his sleep, and seeing the prison doors open, he drew out his sword, and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled.

"But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here."

Clearing his throat cautiously, Esch waited, his finger between the pages of the closed book. He waited for the foundations of the house to tremble, he waited for a great revelation now to manifest itself, he waited for One to give the command that the black flag should be hoisted, and he thought: I must make way for him who shall create time anew. He thought all this and waited. But for the Major the words he had heard were like drops which turned to ice while they fell; he kept silence and all kept silence with him.

Esch said:

"All flight is meaningless, of our own free will we must accept our imprisonment … the invisible shape with the sword stands behind us."

As the Major saw very clearly for a moment, Esch had interpreted the sense of the passage in part correctly, in part in the most obscure and fantastic way; but the old man did not linger over this reflection, and it was blotted out by an emerging picture which, though resembling a memory, was yet scarcely a memory, for it presented everything corporeally before him; the old reservists of the Landsturm and the young recruits were changed into apostles and disciples, members of a community met together in some greengrocer's cellar or dark cave, speaking a strange dark language that was yet as comprehensible as a language one had known in childhood, and over them shone a celestial silvery cloud—and the disciples, like himself, were gazing up to heaven with trust and resolute ardour.

"Let us sing," said Esch, and he began:

"Lord God of Sabaoth,
Take, O take us to

Thine altar,
Bind us all
in one firm
band,
Lead us on
with Thine
own hand,
Lord God of
Sabaoth."

With the sole of his boot Esch beat time; many of the others did the same, rocking themselves in time and singing. The Major may have joined in the singing, but he did not know it, the singing seemed rather to be inside him, a singing behind his closed eyes, like a crystalline drop that falls singing from a cloud. And he heard the voice say: "Do thyself no harm: for we are all here."

Esch let the singing die away, and then he said:

"It is of no avail to flee from the darkness of the prison, for we flee only into outer darkness … we must build the house anew when the time has come."

A voice began again:

"Fan its
spark with
Thine own
breath,
Till it flame
in burning
faith,
Lord God of
Sabaoth."

"Shut up," said another voice.

A neighbouring voice responded:

"Baptize us,
Jesus, with
thy fire,
Let the fire
descend!
To fiery
baptism we
aspire,
Let the fire
descend!
O Lord our
God, of
Thee we
crave
Let the fire
descend!
Nothing
else can
bless and
save.
Let the fire
descend!"

"Shut up," repeated the other voice, a slow voice, but resonant as a vaulted crypt, and it was the voice of a man in Landwehr uniform, a man with a long beard who stood up leaning on two sticks. And despite the effort it cost him, he went on to say: "Anyone who hasn't been dead should shut up … whoever has been dead is baptized, but not the others."

But the first singer had also sprung to his feet and his voice rang out again, singing:

"Save, O
save my
soul from
death,

“Let the fire descend,” added the Major at this moment in a low voice that was yet audible enough to make Esch bend down towards him. It was in a sense an incorporeal approach, at least the Major felt it to be so; there was an element of assurance in it, both reassuring and disconcerting, and the Major studied the ivory crook of his stick that was lying before him on the table, studied the white cuff that projected a little beyond the sleeve of his uniform coat,—it was in a sense an incorporeal serenity, a kind of etherealized, luminous, almost white serenity that expanded in the dark room and spread over the confusion of voices, like a network of tinkling glass in a strangely abstract simplification. The stream of sunlight shimmered outside like a sharp fiery sword; they were safe as in a haven of refuge, in a cave, a cellar, a catacomb.

Perhaps Esch was expecting the Major to say something more, for the Major twice lifted his hand in time with the measure of the song as if desiring to make some acknowledgment,—Esch held his breath, but the Major let his hand sink again. Then Esch said, as though to quicken into life something that was dead:

“The torch of liberty … the blaze of illumination … the torch of true freedom.”

But for the Major everything was so fused and blended into one experience that he could not have told whether he actually saw the fiery crests of torches or heard the voice of the man who was continually intoning “Let the fire descend,” or whether it was Esch’s voice or the wailing of Samwald the little watchmaker that rose in a thin piping from the background:

> “Illumine our darkness, lead us into the joys of paradise.”

But the Landwehr man, gasping as he drew himself upright, waved one of his sticks and emitted hoarse sounds, bawling:

“Arisen from the dead … anyone who hasn’t been buried must shut up.”

Esch showed his strong teeth and laughed:

“Shut up yourself, Gödicke.”

These were rude words: Esch himself could not help laughing so loudly that the laughter somehow stuck in his throat and hurt him, as if he were laughing in his sleep. The Major, indeed, perceived neither the rudeness of the words nor Esch’s overloud laugh, for in his clearer knowledge he saw through the surface coarseness without even remarking it; indeed it seemed to him that Esch would be able with a light touch to set everything right, that Esch’s features, almost unrecognizable in the dusk, were blending with the whole room into a strangely dim, blurred landscape, and through the resonant laughter he saw the glimmer of a soul leaning out of a neighbouring window with a smile, the soul of a brother, yet not an individual soul, nor yet in actual proximity, but a soul that was like an infinitely remote homeland. And he gave Esch a smile. That knowledge, however, filled Esch too, and he too understood that the smile they exchanged raised them together to a high peak; it was as if he had come whirling from a remote distance on the wings of a roaring wind that swept away all the dead past, as if he had come in a fiery red chariot to an appointed goal, a high pinnacle on which it no longer mattered by what name a man was called or whether one figure blended with another, a goal where there was no longer any to-day or to-morrow,—he felt the breath of liberty stir on his forehead, a dream within a dream, and Esch, unbuttoning his waistcoat, stood there drawn up to his full height as if he were about to set his foot on the outer stairway of the castle.

Yet in spite of it all he had not been able to cow Ludwig Gödicke, who now hobbled forward almost up to the table and screamed pugnaciously:

“You can’t say anything till you’ve crawled under the ground … down there …” he bored the point of his stick into the earthen floor, “… down there … crawl down there yourself first.”

Esch had to laugh again. He felt strong, steadfast and robust, firm on his legs, a fine fellow whom it was worth anyone’s while to do in. He stretched his arms out like a man waking from sleep or nailed on a cross:

“Are you maybe thinking of knocking me down, eh? … with your crutches … you and your crutches, you misbegotten object.”

There was some shouting that he was to leave Gödicke alone, Gödicke was a holy man.

Esch made a gesture of sweeping denial:

“No one is holy … there’s no one holy but the son who will build the house.”

“I build all kinds of houses,” roared Gödicke the bricklayer, “all kinds of houses have I built … higher and higher …” and he spat contemptuously.

“Skyscrapers in America, I suppose,” sneered Esch.

“He can build skyscrapers too,” wept Samwald the watchmaker.

“Scraper yourself … scraping down walls is all he’s fit for.”

“From the earth beneath to the very skies.…”

Gödicke had raised his arms in the air with his two sticks; he looked menacing and powerful, "… arisen from the dead!"

"Dead!" screamed Esch, "the dead believe that they're powerful … yes, powerful they are, but they can't awaken life in the dark house … the dead are murderers! Murderers, that's what they are!"

He stopped abruptly, scared by the echo of murder that was now fluttering in the air like a dark butterfly, but scared and silenced no less by the Major's behaviour: for the Major had risen to his feet with a queer, stiff jerk, and had repeated the word, had woodenly repeated "murderers," and now was gazing at the open door and the courtyard outside as if he were expecting something dreadful to appear.

All the men fell silent and stared at the Major. He did not move but went on gazing spellbound at the door, and Esch also turned his eyes towards it. There was nothing there out of the ordinary; the air quivered in the sunlight, the house wall on the other side of that sunny flood—the wall of a quay, the Major could not help thinking—was a blinding white rectangle standing out against the brown box of the doorway and the two wings of the door. But the illusion began to lose its intoxicating immediacy, and when Esch, seizing his opportunity in the silence, read again from the Bible: "and immediately all the doors were opened" the door became for the Major once more an ordinary barn door, and nothing remained except that the ordinary courtyard outside bore a far-off resemblance to his old home and the great farmyard among the byres and stables. And when Esch concluded: "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here" even the serenity vanished, leaving only fear, the fear that in a world of illusion and semblances nothing but evil could take on bodily form. "We are all here," repeated Esch, and the Major could not believe it, for these were no longer apostles and disciples before his eyes, only men of the Landsturm and recruits, men of the rank and file, and he knew that Esch, lonely as he himself, was like him staring in terror at the door. So they stood side by side.

And then it happened that in the depths of the dark box, in the frame of the doorway, a figure came into sight, a round, thickset figure that advanced over the white gravel of the yard without causing the sun to darken. Huguenau. With his hands linked behind him, a passer-by taking an amiable stroll, he walked across the courtyard and paused in the doorway, blinking as he peered in. The Major and Esch were still standing immovably, for although it seemed an eternity to them it was only a matter of a few seconds, and as soon as Huguenau had ascertained what was going on he took off his hat, entered on tiptoe, bowed to the Major and sat down modestly at the end of a seat. "The devil incarnate," murmured the Major, "the murderer …" but perhaps he did not say it, for his throat was drawn together and he looked at Esch almost as if imploring help. Esch, however, smiled with a hint of sarcasm, although he himself felt Huguenau's intrusion as a treacherous attack or an assassination, as a blow bringing the inevitable death that one yet longs for, even when the arm holding the dagger is merely that of a despicable agent,—Esch smiled, and, since the man who faces death is released into freedom and all is permitted to him, he touched the Major's arm: "There's always a traitor among us." And the Major answered in an equally low voice: "He should get out … get out …" and as Esch shook his head he added: "… naked and exposed … yes, naked and exposed are we on the other side," and then he said finally: "… well it doesn't matter …" for in the wave of disgust that he felt suddenly rising within him there was a broad and dominant current of indifference, of weariness. And wearily and heavily he lowered himself again into his seat by the table.

Esch, too, would have liked to hear and see no more. He would have liked to dismiss the meeting. But he could not let the Major depart in such an inharmonious frame of mind, and so, somewhat indecorously, he banged the Bible on the table and announced:

"We shall read again in the Scriptures. Isaiah, chapter forty-two, verse seven: To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house."

"Amen," responded Fendrich.

"It is a fine allegory," said the Major.

"An allegory of redemption," said Esch.

"Yes, an allegory of redemption through repentance," said the Major, and drew himself up with a little jerk, as if on parade, "a fine allegory … shall we now bring the service to a close for to-day?"

"Amen," said Esch, and buttoned up his waistcoat.

"Amen," said the congregation.

As they left the barn and were still standing irresolutely in quiet conversation in the courtyard, Huguenau pushed his way through the groups till he reached the Major, but was taken aback by that officer's discouraging aloofness. Still, he was unwilling to abandon the encounter, all the more as he had a joke ready to fire off: "So the Herr Major has come to assist at our fine new minister's first celebration?" The curt, aloof nod with which he was answered informed him that their relationship was under a cloud, and this became still more obvious when the Major turned round and said with loud emphasis: "Come along,

Esch, you and I will take a walk outside the town." Huguenau was left standing in a state of mingled incomprehension, wrath and vaguely questioning guiltiness.

The other two took the path through the garden. The sun was already inclining towards the western heights. That year it seemed as if the summer were never coming to an end: days of shimmering golden stillness followed each other in equal radiance, as if by their sweetness and peace they wanted to make the war, now in its bloodiest period, appear doubly insensate. As the sun dipped behind the chain of mountain peaks, as the sky paled into tenderer blue, as the road stretched away more peacefully and all life folded in upon itself like the breathing of a sleeper, that stillness grew more and more accessible and acceptable to the human soul. Surely that Sabbath peace lay over the whole of the German fatherland, and in a sudden uprush of yearning the Major thought of his wife and children whom he saw walking over the sunset fields. "I wish this were all over and done with," and Esch could not find any word of comfort for him. Hopeless and dreary this life seemed to both of them, its sole meagre return a walk in the evening landscape which they were both contemplating. It's like a reprieve, thought Esch. And so they went on in silence.

CHAPTER LXIV

It would be false to say that Hanna longed for the end of Heinrich's furlough. She feared it. Night after night this man was her lover. And her daytime life, that even hitherto had been only a blurring and fending-off of consciousness, a darkening directed towards evening and towards bed, was now much more unambiguously directed to that end, with a lack of ambiguity that was startling and could scarcely be attributed to love, with such hardness, such unsentimentality, was it all dominated by the knowledge that she was a woman and he a man: it was a rapture that did not smile, a literally anatomical rapture that was in part too godlike for a lawyer and his wife and in part too base.

Her life was certainly a fading into darkness. Yet this obscuration proceeded only by layers, so to speak; it never deepened into complete unconsciousness, but rather resembled a too-vivid dream in which one is painfully aware that one's will is paralysed; and the more helplessly she was committed to it, the wilder the flora and fauna she accepted, the more did that layer of consciousness awaken which lay immediately above the dream. Only it could not be put into words, not because shame prevented it, but rather because words can never penetrate to the ultimate nakedness that arises from action as the night arises from the day,—her words, too, had fallen into layers, as it were, into at least two layers of language, a night-language closely bound to the event, stammering in its utterance, and a day-language that was detached from the event and went round it in a wide circle, closing in upon it circuitously—the method that the rational always follows until it finally surrenders itself in the screaming and sobbing of despair. And often this day-language was a feeling and seeking for the ultimate cause of the disease that afflicted her. "When the war's over," Heinrich would say almost every day, "everything will be different again … the war has made us all more primitive somehow." "I can't understand it," was Hanna's usual answer to that, or: "One simply can't think it out, it's all so inconceivable." These rejoinders were ultimately a refusal to discuss things with Heinrich as if he were on the same level; he was a guilty party and ought to defend himself instead of surveying things from above. Therefore she said as she stood before the mirror and loosened the light tortoiseshell comb from her fair hair: "That queer man in the Stadthalle talked about our loneliness." Heinrich dismissed him: "The fellow was drunk." Hanna combed her hair and could not help thinking that her breasts were drawn up more tightly when her arms were raised. She could feel them under the silk of her chemise, on which they were outlined like two small pointed tents. She could see them in the mirror that was lit on each side by a small electric candle under a softly patterned pink shade. Then she heard Heinrich say: "It's as if we had been shaken through a sieve … crumbled to dust." She said: "In a time like this no children should be born." She thought of the boy who looked so like Heinrich, and it seemed unimaginable to her that her blonde body should be fashioned to receive a man's seed, to be a woman. She had to shut her eyes. He said: "It's possible that a new generation of criminals is growing up.… There's no guarantee that we mightn't have a flare-up at any moment just like Russia … well, we'll hope not … but our only comfort lies in the extraordinary vitality of inherited tradition.…" Both of them felt that the conversation was tailing off into irrelevancy. It was almost as if a prisoner in the dock were to say: "Lovely weather to-day. A spacious courtroom," and Hanna relapsed into silence for a moment, letting herself go on that wave of hatred which made her nights more sordid, more profound and more lustful. Then she said: "We'll have to wait and see … it has certainly some connection with the war … but not in that way … it's as if the war were only the second thing." "How the second thing?" asked Heinrich. Hanna made a furrow between her eyebrows: "We are the second thing and the war is the second thing … the first thing is something invisible, something that we have given off.…" She remembered how she had longed for the end of their honeymoon to come, so that—as she then believed—she might fling herself with enthusiasm into

the arrangement of their home. Their present situation was not so unlike that; a honeymoon is a kind of furlough too. What she had felt then must have really been a premonition of approaching isolation and loneliness,—perhaps, it dawned on her now, perhaps loneliness was that first thing, perhaps loneliness was the root of the disease! And seeing that it had begun immediately after her wedding—Hanna sent her thoughts back: yes, it had begun even while they were in Switzerland—and seeing that everything fitted in, she felt her suspicion grow keener that Heinrich in those days must have committed some irreparable mistake in his relation to her, some injustice or other that could never be undone but only made greater, a gigantic injustice that had helped in some way to let the war loose. She had applied her face-cream and carefully rubbed it in with her fingers, and now she examined her face in the mirror with jealous attention. The girlish face of those days had vanished, had turned into a woman's face through which that of the young girl now only glimmered. She did not know why all these things were connected, but she concluded her silent train of thought, saying: "The war is not the cause, it's only a secondary thing." And then she realized: the war is a second face, a night face. It was a disintegration of the world, a night face crumbling into cold and bodiless ash, and it was the disintegration of her own face, that disintegration she felt when Heinrich kissed her in the hollow of her shoulder. He said: "Why, certainly, the war is only the result of our mistaken policy," and perhaps he might actually have been able to understand that even policy is only a secondary matter in so far as there is a cause which lies deeper. But he was content with his explanation and Hanna, as she sprayed herself sparingly with the French perfume, now irreplaceable, and sniffed its fragrance, was no longer listening: she had bent her head for a kiss on the nape where the faint silvery hairs grew, and she obtained it. "Another," she said.

CHAPTER LXV

Esch was a man of impetuous moods. So any trifle was capable of provoking him to self-sacrifice. His desire was for simple directness: he wanted to create a world so strong in its simplicity that his own loneliness could be bound fast to it as to an iron stake.

Huguenau was a man who had braved many winds; even when he came into a stuffy room he was braving winds.

There was a man who fled from his own loneliness as far as India and America. He wanted to solve the problem of loneliness by earthly methods; but he was an æsthete, and so he had to kill himself.

Marguerite was a child, a child engendered by a sexual act, burdened with original sin and left alone to sin: someone might happen to give her a nod and ask what her name was—but such fleeting sympathy could not avail to save her.

There is no symbol that does not necessitate a further symbol,—does the immediate experience stand at the beginning or at the end of the series of symbols?

In a medieval poem the series of symbols begins in God and returns to God again—it is poised in God.

Hanna Wendling wanted things to be ordered so that in their poised equilibrium symbols would return to themselves again as in a poem.

One says Farewell, the other deserts—but they all desert from chaos; yet only he who was never bound can escape being shot.

There is nothing more despairing than a child.

He who is mentally lonely can always escape into romanticism, and from spiritual loneliness there is always a way of escape into the intimacy of sex—but for ultimate loneliness, for immediate loneliness, there is no longer any escape into symbols.

Major von Pasenow was a man who yearned passionately for the familiar assurance of home, for an invisible assurance in visible things. And his yearning was so strong that layer by layer the visible sank for him into the invisible, but the invisible, on the other hand, layer by layer became visible.

"Ah," says the romantic, drawing on the cloak of an alien value-system, "ah, now I am one of you and am no longer lonely." "Ah," says the æsthete, drawing on the same cloak, "I am still lonely, but this is a lovely

cloak." The æsthete is the serpent in the romantic Garden of Eden.

Children are intimate at once with everything: the thing is both immediate and at the same time a symbol. Hence the radicality of children.

When Marguerite wept it was only from rage. She did not sympathize even with herself.

The lonelier a man becomes, the more detached he is from the value-system in which he lives, the more obviously are his actions determined by the irrational. But the romantic, clinging to the framework of an alien and dogmatic system, is—it seems incredible—completely rational and unchildlike.

The rationality of the irrational: an apparently completely rational man like Huguenau cannot distinguish between good and evil. In an absolutely rational world there would be no absolute value-system, and no sinners, or at most, mere detrimentals.

The æsthete too does not distinguish good from evil: in that lies his fascination. But he knows very well what is good and what evil, he merely chooses not to distinguish them. And that makes him depraved.

An age that is so rational that it must continually take to its heels.

CHAPTER LXVI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (II)

I draw back from the Jews as much as possible, but I find myself as before compelled to go on observing them. So I cannot help wondering again at the confidence they repose in Samson Litwak, that half-free thinker. It is obvious that the man is a blockhead who was allowed to study merely because he was incapable of following a proper occupation—one has only to compare his bare unwrinkled face, that has looked out on the world from its fringe of beard for more than fifty years, with the furrowed thought-creased faces of the old Jews—and yet he seems to have a kind of oracular prestige among them which they invoke on all occasions. Perhaps it is a survival of the old belief in the half-wit as the mouthpiece of God, for it cannot be respect for scientific knowledge; they are too conscious of possessing the higher knowledge. It is hardly credible that I am mistaken. Dr Litwak, indeed, tries to put me off the scent, but he does it very badly. This tale of his "enlightenment" is pure fabrication: his reverence for the Jews' knowledge is too great, and if he gives me a friendly greeting in spite of the way I treat him, that is doubtless because I have refused to dismiss the Talmudic wisdom of the Jewish ancients as "prejudice." Obviously he has taken this as encouragement to hope that I will keep Nuchem on the right path; and so he submits to my continual snubbing of him and his attempts at familiarity.

To-day I met him on the stairs. I was going up and he was coming down. Had it been the other way about I could simply have dashed past him; it's not so easy to stop a man who is rushing down. But I was climbing up too slowly, what with the heat of the city and my half-starved condition. He barred my way jokingly with his walking-stick. Probably he wanted me to jump over it like a poodle (I catch myself in these last days becoming touchy, far too touchy; that too may be the result of semi-starvation). I raised the stick with two fingers so as to get past it.

Oh, how I loathed his grinning familiarity! He nodded to me:

"What do you say to it now? everybody's quite upset."

"Yes, it's very hot."

"If it were only the heat!"

"Well, the Austrians are held up in Transylvania."

"Who's speaking of Transylvania?… what do you really say to it now? he says one must have joy in the heart."

My condition makes me enter into the most idiotic discussions:

"That sounds quite like a psalm of David … have you any objection?"

"Objection? I only object … I only say the old grandfather's right, old people are always right."

"Prejudice, Samson, prejudice."

"You won't have *me* on toast!"

"Well, what does dear Grandpapa say?"

"Now listen! He says, a Jew must have joy not in the heart but here.…" He tapped himself on the forehead.

"In the head, then?"

“Yes, in the head.”

“And what do you do with your hearts when you’re joyful in the head?”

“With the heart we must serve … *uwchol levovcho, uwchol nawschecho, uwchol meaudecho*, that means, with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, and with all one’s might.”

“Does Grandpapa say that too?”

“Not only the grandfather says it, it is so.”

I tried to look at him pityingly, but it did not quite come off:

“And you call yourself enlightened, Herr Dr Samson Litwak?”

“Of course I’m an enlightened man … just as you are an enlightened man … of course, but is that any reason for upsetting the law?”

He laughed.

“God bless you, Dr Litwak,” said I and went on climbing.

He replied: “A hundredfold,” he was still laughing, “but no man can upset the law, not you, not I, not Nuchem.…”

I went on ascending the sordid stair. Why did I stay here? In the Army hostel I would be better accommodated. Texts on the walls instead of oleographs, for instance.

CHAPTER LXVII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (12)

He said: my
mule,
quick-
trotting,
carries me
and thee
together
through our
dream of
Zion,
with
jingling
bells and
purple
bridle
flying.
He said: I
called to
thee.
He said: my
heart is
open to the
miracle
of the great
Temple
with its
thousand
stairs,
the city
where my
fathers said
their
prayers.
He said: we
two shall
build a
tabernacle.
He said: till
now I have
waited for
release
sunk in my
book,
waiting till

I awoke.
He said:
this joy I have
longed for,
and this peace …
he did not speak, it was his heart that spoke.
She too said nothing.
Deep in silence lapped
so they went on,
and yet their hearts were rapt.
So they went on,
and yet their hearts were rapt
in silence, inner yearning, hidden glory,
so they went on
and heeded not the story
of the mean streets they passed, the dens of shame.
She said: in the most secret part of me
the spark is fanned and rises into flame,
a blaze of light, a splendour without name.
He said: I thought of thee.
She said:
my heart is kindled in a glow,
from me, a sinner, thou dost not turn aside.

He said:
bright
gleams the
road to
Zion that
we go.
She said:
for us thou
once wert
crucified.
They said
no more:
light
dazzled
what was
said.
They did no
more: the
deed was
perfected.

CHAPTER LXVIII

"What, are you thinking of going out at this late hour, Lieutenant Jaretzki?"

Sister Mathilde was sitting near the porch of the hospital, and Lieutenant Jaretzki, standing in the illuminated doorway, lit himself a cigarette.

"It was too hot to-day to go out …" he clicked his lighter shut, "a good invention, these petrol lighters … you know, don't you, that I'm going away next week, Sister?"

"Yes, so I heard. To Kreuznach, to a convalescent home? … You must be glad to get out of here at last.…"

"Oh, well … I suppose you're glad to get rid of me."

"You haven't been exactly a good patient."

Silence.

"Come for a little walk, Sister, it's cool now."

Sister Mathilde hesitated:

"I have to go in again soon … but, if you like, let's take a short turn."

Jaretzki said reassuringly:

"I'm quite sober, Sister."

They went out into the road. The hospital with its two rows of lighted windows lay to their right. The outline of the town beneath them was just discernible, its mass was a little blacker than the blackness of the night. A few lights were burning there, and on the hills, too, a light now and then gleamed from some solitary farmhouse. The town clocks struck nine.

"Wouldn't you like to be leaving too, Sister Mathilde?"

"Oh, I'm quite happy.… I have my work."

"It's really frightfully decent of you to come for a walk with a good-for-nothing down-and-out like me, Sister."

"Why shouldn't I go for a walk with you once in a way, Lieutenant Jaretzki?"

"Why not, indeed.…" After a while: "So you want to stay here all your life, do you?"

"Not exactly … not when the war's over."

"Then you're going home? … to Silesia?"

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, one soon finds out these things … and you think that it'll be a simple matter just to go home … as if nothing had happened?"

"I haven't really thought about it … things always turn out differently."

"Do you know, Sister … now, I'm quite sober … but it's my firm conviction that none of us will ever really get home again."

"But we all want to get home again, Lieutenant; what should we have been fighting for, if not for our homes?"

Jaretzki stood still.

"What have we been fighting for? What have we been fighting for … you'd better not ask, Sister … besides, just as you said, things always turn out differently in any case."

Sister Mathilde made no reply. Then she said:

“What do you mean exactly, Lieutenant?”

Jaretzki laughed:

“Well, should you ever have expected to be going for a walk with a boozing, one-armed engineer? … you’re a Countess, aren’t you?”

Sister Mathilde did not answer. She was not a Countess, but she was certainly a *von* and her grandmother was a Countess.

“Perhaps it doesn’t matter a rap … if I’d been a Count I should just have been the same, I should have had to booze just the same … you see, we’re all much too lonely for a thing like that to make much difference to us … you’re not offended, are you?”

“Oh, why should I? …” she saw his profile against the darkness and was afraid that he might try to seize her hand. She crossed to the other side of the road.

“Time to turn back now, Lieutenant.”

“You must be lonely too, Sister, or else you couldn’t stick it out … let’s be glad that the war isn’t coming to an end.”

They were once more at the iron gate of the hospital. Most of the windows were now dark. One could see the lowered lights in the sick wards.

“Well, now I’m going to have a drink, all the same … you wouldn’t join me in any case, Sister.”

“It’s high time I was in, Lieutenant Jaretzki.”

“Good-night, Sister: thank you very much.”

“Good-night, Lieutenant.”

Sister Mathilde felt somehow disappointed and depressed. She called after him:

“Don’t be too late in coming back home, Lieutenant.”

CHAPTER LXIX

Since that walk through the evening fields with Esch the Major often found himself going through Fischerstrasse after his day’s work was done, indeed he often caught himself slowing down a street or two farther on, standing uncertainly for a moment, and then turning back. One could have literally affirmed that he went slinking round and round the office of the *Kur-Trier Herald.* Perhaps he would actually have gone in had he not feared an encounter with Huguenau, and he did not want to meet Huguenau; the mere prospect of meeting him in the street filled him with embarrassment. But when Esch suddenly appeared instead of Huguenau, he could not tell at first whether he had not feared this encounter even more. For there he was, the Town Commandant in full uniform, his sword at his side, standing with a newspaper civilian fellow, standing in his uniform in the open street, and he had not only offered the fellow his hand but, instead of leaving it at that, he was actually filled with happiness, forgetting all decorum, because the man showed signs of accompanying him. Still, Esch had removed his hat most respectfully, and the Major was staring at close-cropped bristling grey hair,—and it was like an assurance, like a sudden evocation of Bible classes at home, and at the same time it was the reaffirmation of that afternoon’s brotherhood, bringing with it the need to say something kind to this man who was almost a friend, even if it were only that Esch might cherish a happy memory of him; he hesitated a little longer and then said: “Come along.”

As a result, these walks became frequent. Not so frequent, indeed, as the Major or even Esch would have liked. For not only were the times becoming more exacting—troops were continually being billeted and withdrawn again, columns of motor transport rattled through the streets, and the Town Commandant had often to work all through the night—but Major von Pasenow could not bring himself to the point of haunting the *Herald* office again, and it was some time before Esch realized this. When he did, however, he began to make allowances; he waited discreetly near the Major’s headquarters, and when practicable took Marguerite with him. “The little monkey insists on coming with me,” he would say; and though the Major was not quite certain whether the child’s insistence was to be considered delightful or intrusive, he accepted it kindly and stroked Marguerite’s black curls. Then the three of them would wander over the fields or down the path beside the bushes on the river-bank, and often it was as if there stirred a yearning of farewell, a gentle and wistful flowing of the heart, a living ebb of resignation; it was like that certitude of the end in which every beginning has its source. But gentle as it was, it contained a trace of dejection, perhaps because Esch had no part in this farewell, perhaps because it was proper that he should be so excluded, perhaps, however, because Esch remained inscrutable on these points, persisting in a disappointing silence. That was somehow dark and secretive, for there was still a fading hope that everything could be made right and simple if Esch would only speak. Alas, it was amazingly difficult to determine precisely what he expected Esch to say; still, Esch ought to have known what it was. So they went on in silence, in the silence of the evening light and of a growing disappointment, and the radiance

lying on the fields became a misleading and weary brightness. And when Esch took off his hat to let the wind blow through his short bristling hair, that gesture took on such an unseemly intimacy that the Major almost pitied the little girl for having fallen into the power of such a man. Once he said: “Little slave-girl,” but that too died out in weary indifference. Marguerite, however, ran on ahead and did not concern herself about the two men.

They had climbed to the top of the valley ridge and were following the edge of the forest. The short dry grass crackled under their shoes. Stillness lay over the valley. One could hear the creaking of the carts on the road below, the stubble-fields revealed the brown soil, and the wind blew cool from the dusky depths of the foliage. The vineyards hung green on the slopes, in the rustling of the trees the, silvery, metallic sharpness of autumn was already discernible, and the stiff stems by the forest edge with their black and red berries were ready to shrivel up. Over the western flanks of the hills the sun was sinking, blazing like fire in the windows of the valley houses. Each house was standing on a long carpet of shadow pointing east; one could look down on the roofs of the prison buildings, flecked with red and black, and see right into the bleak, waste courtyards where there were also gloomy sharply cut shadows.

A small field-path led down the slope and entered the main road close by the prison. Marguerite, running on ahead, had turned down it, and the Major took this as a sign from God: “We’ll turn back,” he said listlessly. But when they were about half-way down they both came to a stop and listened: a curious brumming noise assailed them in rhythmic jerks; it came from below, but one simply could not tell from what quarter. Nothing could be seen but a car coming speeding from the town with its engine humming in the usual way and its horn hooting every minute or so; a long cloud of dust trailed behind it. The uncanny noise had nothing to do with the car. “An ominous sound,” said the Major uneasily. “Some kind of machine,” said Esch, although it sounded not at all like a machine. The car followed the windings of the road and with much tooting of its horn arrived at the prison. Esch’s sharper eyes observed that it was the Commandant’s official car, and he became uneasy when he noted that it did not appear again on the other side of the prison buildings. But he said nothing, only hurrying his steps. The curious sound grew harder and more sharply accentuated, and when they came in sight of the prison gate they could see the car halted there among a crowd of excited people. “Something has happened,” said the Major, and now they could hear welling from the barred and railed-in windows of the prison a frightful chorus beat out in bars of three phrases: “We’re hungry, we’re hungry, we’re hungry…. We’re hungry, we’re hungry, we’re hungry…. We’re hungry, we’re hungry, we’re hungry …” and from time to time the chorus was interrupted by a conglomerate farmyard howl. The chauffeur came running to meet them: “Please, sir, it’s a rebellion … we have been looking for you everywhere …” then he ran back to summon the gatekeeper.

The people made way for the Major, but he had come to a stop. The air was still vibrating with the threefold chorus, and now Marguerite began to dance in time to it: “We’re hungry, we’re hungry, we’re hungry,” she carolled. The Major gazed at the building with the dreadful impenetrable windows, he gazed at the dancing child whose laughter seemed to him strangely mechanical, strangely evil, and horror overwhelmed him. Implacable destiny, inevitable trial! The chauffeur was still pulling at the iron bell and beating on the gate, but at last the grille was opened and the gate turned creaking and heavy on its hinges. The Major was leaning against a tree and his lips murmured: “This is the end.” Esch moved as if to help—the Major waved him off. “This is the end,” he repeated, but he drew himself up, touched the ribbon of his Iron Cross, and then, his hand on his sword-hilt, advanced quickly towards the prison gate.

He vanished inside it. Esch sat down on the small escarpment beside the road. The air was still shattered by the syncopated cries. A single shot rang out, followed by a renewed howling. Then a few last cries like the last drops from a turned-off water-tap. Then there was silence. Esch watched the gate that had closed behind the Major—“This is the end,” he echoed, and went on waiting. But the end did not come, no earthquake broke out, no angel descended, and the gate was not opened. The child squatted beside him, and he would have liked to take her in his arms. Like the wings of a stage scene the prison walls towered up to the bright evening sky, like teeth with gaps between them, and Esch felt far away from himself, far away from what was happening around him, far away from everything; he shrank from changing his posture and was no longer aware how he came to be there. Beside the gate hung a notice-board that could no longer be deciphered; of course it was a list of visiting-hours, but they were only words. For even the demagogues and murderers and deformed creatures that were imprisoned would come out of their prison into a new and more enlightened community in a Promised Land. He heard the child say: “There’s Uncle Huguenau,” and he saw Huguenau pass by at the double, saw him and was not surprised, so soundless was everything, soundless the step of Huguenau, soundless the movements of the people by the gate, soundless as the movements of artistes and rope dancers when the music has ceased, soundless as the paling of the clear evening sky. Remote beyond recovery lay the distant horizon before the dreamer, yet he was no dreamer but an orphan seeking vainly for his home; and he was like a man whose desire has transformed itself

without his knowing it, like one who has merely deadened his pain but cannot forget it. The first stars came out in the sky, and it was to Esch as if he had sat for days and years in that self-same spot, wrapped in a padded and spectral silence. Then the movements of the waiting crowd became more infrequent, more shadowy, died away completely, and there remained a soundless waiting black mass before the gate. And finally Esch was aware only of the damp grass resting against the palm of his hand.

The child had vanished; perhaps she had gone off with Huguenau; Esch did not bother, but stared at the gate. At last the Major appeared. He walked quickly with an unusually undeviating air, it almost looked as if he had a limp and were trying to conceal it. He made straight for the car. Esch had sprung to his feet. The Major was now standing in the car, he stood there drawn up to his full height and looked over Esch's head, over the heads of the crowd that were pressing in silence round the car; he looked along the white road ahead of him and over at the town, in which lights were already twinkling from the windows. In the near vicinity a red light shone out; Esch knew where that was. Maybe the Major had observed it too, for he now looked down at Esch and said, gravely holding out his hand: "Well, it doesn't matter." Esch said nothing; he shouldered his way quickly through the crowd and took the path over the fields. Had he turned round, however, and had it not been so dark, he could have seen that the Major remained standing in the car, looking after him as he vanished into the night.

After some time he heard the engine starting and saw the headlights of the car following the windings of the road.

CHAPTER LXX

Huguenau had trotted home from the prison as fast as he could, with Marguerite running behind him. In the printing-shed he bade the press be stopped: "Some important news, Lindner," and then he betook himself to his room to do some writing. When he had finished it he said "Salut," and spat in the direction of the Eschs' living-rooms. "Salut," he said again, as he passed the kitchen door, and then he handed his composition to Lindner, "Among the news of the town, in small type," he ordered. And next day the following appeared in small type among the news of the town in the *Kur-Trier Herald:*

Incident at the Prison.—Yesterday evening there were some regrettable scenes at the prison. Some of the inmates believed that they had grounds for complaint about the inferior quality of the prison fare, and the unpatriotic elements among them seized on this as a pretext for abusing the authorities and causing an uproar. The prompt intervention of the Town Commandant, Major von Pasenow, who behaved with great courage and composure, soon quelled the disturbance. The rumour that this was really an attempt to escape on the part of alleged deserters now under lock and key pending execution is, we are informed on the best authority, quite without foundation, as there are no deserters in this prison. No one was injured.

It was another of these lucid inspirations of his, and Huguenau could hardly sleep for pure joy. He kept on reckoning it all up:

firstly, that bit about the deserters would annoy the Major, but the reference to the inferior food could not leave a Town Commandant complacent either, and if there was a man who deserved to be annoyed it was the Major;

secondly, the Major would hold Esch responsible, especially because of that hint about information on the best authority; for nobody would believe that Esch knew nothing of it,—and that would certainly put an end to the walking excursions of these two gentlemen;

thirdly, when one considered how furious the skinny Esch would be, the horse-faced Reverend, it was a sweet and gratifying thought;

fourthly, it was all so law-abiding—he was the editor and could put in what he liked, and the Major would have to be grateful to him, besides, for the compliments he had worked in;

fifthly and sixthly, there was no end to the gratifying consequences, it was, in a word, a highly successful stroke, it was, in a word, a *coup*,—and besides, it would make the Major respect him: the reports of a Huguenau had the knack of striking home, even if one did despise them;

yes, fifthly and sixthly and seventhly, one could go on and on, there was ever so much more of it, although to be sure there was a suggestion of unpleasantness somewhere that it was better not to think about.

In the morning Huguenau read the article in the printing-shed and was again delighted. He looked out of the window and cast a glance up at the office, twisting his face ironically. But he did not go up there. Not, of course, that he was afraid of the Reverend. When a man was only standing on his rights he had no need to be afraid. And a man must stand on his rights when he is persecuted. Even if it should bring everything

about his ears a man must stand on his rights. All a fellow wants is to be left in peace and quiet; he only wants his due. And so Huguenau went to the barber's, where he studied the *Herald* yet once more.

To be sure, his dinner remained a problem. It would be unpleasant to sit at the same table with Esch, who would in some way, although without any justification, feel himself the injured party. One knew these high and mighty looks that priests gave; enough to take away a man's appetite. And this Reverend was a Communist himself, and wanted to socialize everything, and yet always behaved as if it were the other fellow who was trying to smash up society, just because he wouldn't let himself be put upon.

Huguenau went for a walk and thought it over. But he could not hit on a good idea. It was like going to school: let one be as inventive as anything, the only final course is to sham sick. So he turned back so as to get home before Esch, and climbed the stairs to see Mother Esch (for he had recently taken to calling her that). And with every step that he mounted his indisposition became more genuine. Perhaps he was really rather unwell, and it might be better to eat nothing at all. Yet, after all, his board and lodging were included in his salary, and he needn't make Esch a present of any of it.

"Frau Esch, I'm not well."

Frau Esch looked up and was touched by Huguenau's pathetic appearance.

"I don't think I can eat anything, Frau Esch."

"But, Herr Huguenau … a little soup, I'll make you some nice soup … that never did anyone any harm."

Huguenau considered. Then he said gloomily:

"A bouillon?"

Frau Esch was startled.

"Yes, but … I haven't any beef in the house."

Huguenau grew gloomier.

"Oh, no beef? … I think I'm in a fever … just feel how hot I am, Mother Esch.…"

Frau Esch came nearer and hesitatingly laid a finger on Huguenau's hand.

Huguenau said:

"Perhaps an omelette would be the thing."

"Hadn't I better make you some herb-tea?"

Huguenau suspected economy:

"Oh, an omelette could surely be managed … you must have eggs in the house … say, three eggs."

Thereupon with dragging feet he left the kitchen.

Partly because it was the right thing for an invalid to do, partly because he had to make up for the sleep he had lost in the night, he lay down on the sofa. But there was little chance of sleep, for his excitement over the successful journalistic *coup* was still vibrating. In a kind of waking doze he looked up at the mirror above the washstand, looked at the window, listened to the noises in the house. There were the usual kitchen noises: he could hear a bit of meat being beaten—so she had swindled him after all, the fat madam, so that that blighter might have all the meat to himself. Of course she would argue she couldn't make bouillon out of pork, but a nice bit of lightly fried pork never hurt anyone, not even an invalid. Then he heard a short, sharp chopping on a board, and diagnosed it as the cutting of vegetables,—he had always been scared as he watched his mother chopping up parsley or celery with quick-cutting strokes, scared for fear she would chop off her finger-tips. Kitchen knives were sharp. He was glad when the chopping noise ended and mother wiped her unharmed fingers on the kitchen towel. If one could only go to sleep: it might be better to get into bed, and then the Esch woman could sit beside him and knit or give him hot fomentations. He felt his hand; it was really hot. The thing to do was to think of something pleasant. Women, for instance. Naked women. That was the stair creaking, someone coming up. Strange, for father wasn't usually so early. Oh, it was only the postman. Mother Esch was speaking to him. The baker used always to come up, but he never came now. That was just nonsense: it was impossible to sleep while one was hungry.

Huguenau blinked again at the window, and noted outside the chain of the Colmar mountains; the castellan of the royal castle was a Major, the Kaiser himself had appointed him. Haïssez les Prussiens et les ennemis de la sainte religion. Somebody laughed in Huguenau's ear; he heard words in Alsatian dialect. A cooking-pot boiled over; it hissed on the stove. Now someone was whispering, "we're hungry, we're hungry, we're hungry." That was too stupid. Why couldn't he have his dinner with the others? he was being treated worse and worse. Perhaps they would give his seat to the Major? The stair was creaking again—Huguenau flinched, it was his father's step. Oh, stuff, it was only Esch, the would-be Reverend.

A swine that Esch; served him right if he was annoyed. Tit for tat. You can't play with knives and not be cut. Esch had managed to turn Protestant; next thing he'd turn Jew and have himself cut, circumcised; must remember to tell the madam that. Finger-tips. Knife-tips. Best of all just to get up and go over to the office and ask him if he was thinking of turning Jew. All nonsense to be afraid of him; I'm only too lazy. But she

should bring me my dinner, and be quick about it … before that sanctimonious blighter gets his.

Huguenau listened intently to hear if they were sitting down to table. No wonder a man grew thinner and thinner with that Esch bagging everything. But that was what he was like. A Reverend had to have a belly. Pure fraud, his parson's black coat. An executioner had a black coat too. An executioner had to eat a lot to keep up his strength. One never knew whether people were coming to lead one to the block or merely bringing one's dinner. From now on he would go to the hotel and eat meat at the Major's table. That very evening. If that omelette was much longer in coming there would be a good row. An omelette only took five minutes to make!

Frau Esch came quietly into the room and set the plate with the omelette on a chair and pushed the chair up to the sofa.

"Hadn't I better make you some tea as well, Herr Huguenau, some herb-tea?"

Huguenau looked up. His irritation had almost vanished; her sympathy did him good.

"I'm rather fevered, Frau Esch."

She ought at least to pass her hand over his forehead to feel if he had fever; he was vexed because she did not.

"I think I'll go to bed, Mother Esch."

Frau Esch, however, stood stolidly before him and insisted on giving him tea: it was a very special kind of tea, not only an ancient recipe but also a famous remedy; the herbalist, who had inherited the secret from his father and great-grandfather, had become very rich, he owned a house in Cologne, and people went to consult him from all over the country. She had seldom said so many words in one breath.

None the less Huguenau resisted:

"Some cherry-brandy, Frau Esch, would do me good."

She primmed up her face with disgust: spirits? No! Even her husband, whose health was not of the most robust, had been won over to her tea.

"That so? Does Esch drink the tea?"

"Yes," said Frau Esch.

"All right, then, for the love of God make me some too," and with a sigh Huguenau sat up and ate his omelette.

CHAPTER LXXI

Heinrich's departure had passed off with remarkable ease. In so far as physical and spiritual effects can be separated, it might have been called a purely physical experience. As Hanna came home from the station she herself felt a little like an empty house where the blinds have been drawn down. But that was all. Besides, she knew for certain that Heinrich would return unharmed from the war. And this conviction of hers, which kept the departing soldier from turning into a martyr, not only obviated the sentimental outburst she had dreaded at the station, but had the more far-reaching effect of neutralizing and displacing her wish that he might never return. When she said to her son: "Daddy will soon come back," they probably both knew what she meant.

The physical experience, for as such she was entitled to regard this six-weeks' furlough, now presented itself to her mind as a contraction of her vital powers, a contraction of her ego; it had been like a damming-in of her ego within the limits of her body, like the foaming narrowing of a river within a ravine. In the past, now that she thought of it, she had always had the feeling that her ego was not bounded by her skin and could radiate through that tenuous covering into her silken underclothing, and it had been almost as if even her gowns were informed by an emanation from her ego (that was probably why she had such infallible taste in matters of fashion), yes, it had been almost as if her ego stretched far beyond her body and enveloped rather than inhabited it, and as if she did not think in her head but somewhere outside it, on a higher watch-tower, so to speak, from which her own bodily existence, however important it might be, could be observed and regarded as a trivial irrelevancy; but during these last six weeks of physical experience, during that headlong rush through the ravine, of all that diffused spaciousness nothing had survived but a shining vapour above the tossing waters, a rainbow glitter that was in a way the last refuge of her soul. Now, however, that the kindly plain once more spread before her and she felt as if released from fetters, her feeling of relief and smoothness turned at the same time into a wish to forget the troubled narrows. This forgetfulness, however, encroached upon her only a little at a time. All her personal memories vanished with relatively great rapidity; Heinrich's bearing, his voice, his words, his walk, all that very soon disappeared; but the general memories persisted. To use a highly improper analogy: the first to disappear was his face, then his movable extremities, his hands and feet, but the un-moving, rigid body, the torso reaching from the breast-bone to the thigh, that lascivious image of the male, persisted in the depths

of her memory like the statue of a god embedded in the soil or washed by the surf of a Tyrrhenian sea. And the farther this encroaching forgetfulness advanced—and that was the frightful part of it—the more that statue of the god was shortened, the more emphatic and isolated became its indecency, an indecency on which forgetfulness encroached more and more slowly, filching smaller and smaller portions—paralysed by that indecency. That is only a metaphor, and like all metaphors coarsens the real truth which is always shadowy, a play of undefined ideas, a mingled current of half-remembered memories, half-thought thoughts and half-wished desires, a river without banks, over which rises a silvery vapour, a silvery emanation that spreads to the very clouds and the black sky of stars. So the torso in the mud of the river was no mere torso, it was a hewn boulder, it was an isolated piece of furniture, household rubbish jettisoned in the stream of events, a lump abandoned to the surf: wave succeeded wave, day was woven into night and night into day, and what the days transmitted to each other was inscrutable, sometimes more inscrutable than the dreams that followed each other, and at times it included something that recognizably suggested the secret knowledge of schoolgirls yet at the same time somehow aroused a secret wish to flee from such infantile knowledge, to flee into the world of the individual and to disinter Heinrich's face once more from forgetfulness. But that was only a wish, and its fulfilment admitted of about as much possibility as the complete restoration of a Greek statue found in the soil: that is to say, it could not be fulfilled.

At first sight it might seem irrelevant whether the individual or the general prevailed in Hanna's memories. But in an age when the general is everywhere so obviously dominant, where the social bonds of humanity that are spun only from individual to individual have been loosened in favour of collective concepts of hitherto undreamed-of unities, where a de-individualized state of ruthlessness prevails such as is natural only to childhood and old age, in such a time the memory of an individual cannot escape subjection to the general law, and the isolation of a highly insignificant woman, be she ever so pretty and ever such an excellent bedfellow, cannot be explained simply as the result of an unfortunately complete deprivation of sexual intercourse, but forms a part of the whole and mirrors, like every individual destiny, a metaphysical necessity that is laid upon the world, a physical event, if one likes to call it that, and yet metaphysical in its tragedy: for that tragedy is the isolation of the ego.

CHAPTER LXXII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (13)

Can this age, this disintegrating life, be said still to have reality? My passivity increases from day to day, not because I am exhausted by struggling with a reality that may be stronger than myself, but because on all sides I encounter unreality. I am thoroughly conscious that the meaning and the ethos of my life can be found only in activity, but I begin to suspect that this age no longer has time for the contemplative activity of philosophizing, which is the sole real activity. I try to philosophize—but where is the dignity of knowledge to be found to-day? Is it not long defunct? Has Philosophy itself not disintegrated into mere phrases in face of the disintegration of its object? This world without Being, this world without repose, this world that can find and maintain its equilibrium only in increasing speed of movement, this world's mad racing has become the pseudo-activity of mankind and will hurl it into nothingness—is there any resignation deeper than that of an age which is denied the capacity to philosophize? Philosophy itself has become an æsthetic pastime, a pastime that no longer really exists but has fallen into the empty detachment of evil and become a recreation for citizens who need to kill time of an evening! nothing is left us but number, nothing is left us but law!

It often seems to me as if the state I am now in, the state that keeps me here in this Jewish house, is beyond resignation and is rather a kind of wisdom that has learned to come to terms with a completely alien environment. For even Nuchem and Marie are alien to me, even these two on whom I had set my last hope, the hope that they were my creations, the sweet, unrealizable hope that I had taken their fate into my own hands and could determine it. Nuchem and Marie are not my creatures and never were so. Treacherous hope, to take the liberty of shaping the world!

Does the world have an independent existence? No. Do Nuchem and Marie have an independent existence? Certainly not, for no being exists in itself. But the moments that determine destinies lie far beyond the range of my thinking or my powers. I myself can only fulfil my own law, supervise my own prescribed business; I am in no case to penetrate farther, and even although my love for Nuchem and Marie is not extinguished, even though I do not relax in the struggle for their souls and their fate, yet the moments by which they are determined are beyond my reach, remain hidden from me, as hidden as the white-bearded grandfather whom I meet, to be sure, now and then in the hall, but who takes on his real shape only in the living-room from which I am always excluded, and who treats with me only through his delegate Litwak; they remain as hidden from me as the white-bearded General Booth whose picture hangs

in the reception-room of the hostel. And when I consider it objectively, it is not a combat that I am engaged in, neither with the grandfather nor the Salvation Army General, rather do I strive to see justice done to them, and my wooing of Nuchem and Marie applies also to them; yes, sometimes I believe that my aim is exclusively to win through my actions the love of these old men, to win their blessing so that I may not die lonely. For reality is to be found in them that have laid down the law.

Is this resignation? Is it a revulsion from all æsthetic? Where did I stand of yore? My life is darkening behind me and I do not know if I have lived or if my life was a tale told to me, so far has it sunk in remote seas. Did ships bear me to the shores of the farthest east and farthest west? was I a cotton-picker in American plantations, was I the white hunter in the elephant jungles of India? Everything is possible, nothing, not even a castle in a park, is improbable; heights and depths, all are possible, for nothing permanent has survived in this dynamic activity that exists for its own sake, this activity that is manifest in work, in quietness and serene clarity: nothing has survived—flung to the winds is my ego, flung into nothingness; irrealizable my yearning, unattainable the Promised Land, invisible the ever-brightening but constantly receding radiance, and the community that we grope for is devoid of strength yet full of evil will. Vain hope, and often groundless pride—the world has remained an alien enemy, or even less than an enemy, merely an alien entity whose surface I could explore but into which I could never penetrate, an alien entity into which I shall never penetrate, lost as I am in ever-increasing strangeness, blind in ever-increasing blindness, failing and falling asunder in yearning remembrance of the night of home, to become at last merely a vanishing breath of what has been. I have traversed many ways to find the One in which all the others are conjoined, but they have only diverged more and more from each other, and even God has not been established by me but by my fathers.

I said to Nuchem:

“You are a suspicious people, an angry people; you are jealous even of God and are constantly pulling Him up even in His own Book.”

He answered:

“The law is imperishable. God is not until every jot and tittle of the Law has been deciphered.”

I said to Marie:

“You are a brave but a thoughtless people! You believe that you need only be good and strike up music in order to draw God near.”

She answered:

“Joy in God is God, His grace is inexhaustible.”

I said to myself:

“You are a fool, you are a Platonist, you believe that in comprehending the world you can shape it and raise yourself in freedom to Godhood. Can you not see that you are bleeding yourself to death?”

I answered myself:

“Yes, I am bleeding to death.”

CHAPTER LXXIII

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (9)

Epistemological Excursus.

Can this age be said still to have reality? Does it possess any real value in which the meaning of its existence is preserved? Is there a reality for the non-meaning of a non-existence? In what haven has reality found its refuge? in science, in law, in duty or in the uncertainty of an ever-questioning logic whose point of plausibility has vanished into the infinite? Hegel called history “the path to the liberation of spiritual substance,” the path leading to the self-liberation of the spirit, and it has become the path leading to the self-destruction of all values.

Of course the question is not whether Hegel’s interpretation of history has been overthrown by the World War; that had been done already by the stars in their courses; for a reality that had grown autonomous through a development extending over four hundred years would have ceased in any circumstances to be capable of submitting any longer to a deductive system. A more important question would be to inquire into the logical possibilities of this emergent anti-deductive reality, into the logical grounds for such anti-deductiveness; in short, to examine “the conditions of possible experience” in which this development of the spirit has become inevitable—but a contempt for all philosophy, a weariness of words, are themselves inherent in this reality and in this development, and it is only with a complete mistrust of the coercive suasion of words that we can pose the urgent methodological questions: what is an historical event? what is historical unity? or, to go still further: what is an event at all? what principle of selection must be followed

to weld single occurrences into the unity of an event?

Autonomous life is as indissolubly and organically knit to the category of value as autonomous consciousness is knit to the category of truth,—one could find other names for the phenomena of truth and value, but as phenomena they would remain as irrefutable as *Sum* and *Cogito*, both of them drawn out of the isolated autonomy of the Self, both of them activities as well as surrounding products of that Self; thus value can be split up into the value-making activity, which in the widest sense creates worlds, and into the formed, spatially discernible and generally visible value-product, and the concept of value splits into the corresponding categories: into the ethical value of the activity and the æsthetic value of the product, the obverse and reverse sides of the same medal, and it is in combination and only in combination that these give the most general concept of value and the logical co-ordinates of all life. And, indeed, this is borne out by history: for the writing of history in antiquity was already governed by its concepts of value, the moralizing historians of the eighteenth century applied theirs with full deliberation, and in Hegel's scheme the concept of an absolute value is most clearly revealed in the ideas of a "World-spirit" and a "High Court of History." It is not surprising that the post-Hegelian philosophy of history occupied itself chiefly in considering the methodological function of the concept of value, bringing about incidentally the fateful splitting-up of the whole realm of knowledge into a philosophy of nature unaffected by values and a philosophy of spirit conditioned by values—which, if one likes, may be considered the first declared bankruptcy of philosophy, since it confined the identity of Thought and Being to the realm of logic and mathematics, allowing all the rest of knowledge to dispense with what is the main idealistic task of philosophy or to relegate it to the vagueness of intuition.

Hegel levelled against Schelling the (justified) reproach that he had projected the Absolute into the world "as if it were a bullet from a pistol." But that applies with equal force to the concept of value projected by Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy. Simply to project a concept, of value into history and summarily to describe as "values" all that history has preserved may be permissible at a pinch for the purely æsthetic values of the creative arts, but is otherwise so sweepingly false that it drives one in contradiction to maintain that history is a conglomeration of non-values, and to deny outright that there is any value-reality in history.

First Thesis:

history is composed of values, since life can be comprehended only in the category of value—yet these values cannot be introduced into reality as absolutes, but can only be thought of in reference to an ethically-motived value-positing subject. Hegel's absolute and objectified "world spirit" was such a subject introduced into reality, but the all-embracing absoluteness of its operation could not but result in a *reductio ad absurdum*. (This is another example of the impassable limits imposed on deductive thinking.) These values are not absolutes, but only finite postulates. Where a concrete and *a priori* finite subject comes into question, that is to say, an actual person, the relativity of values, their dependence on the subject, becomes immediately clear; the biography of any person is composed of all the value-contents which have been important to him. In himself he may be a person of no value, even a destroyer of values, such as a bandit leader or a deserter, but as the centre of his own system of values he is yet a ripe subject for biography and history. And the same is true of the fictive centres of value such as a state, or a club, or a nation, or the German Hanseatic League, historically considered; indeed, even the histories of inanimate objects, as for instance the architectural history of a house, are made up from a selection of those facts which would have been important to the respective subjects if they had had a will to create values. An event without a value-positing centre dissolves into nebulosity—the battle of Kunersdorf consists not of an army list of the Grenadiers who took part in it, but of the reality-formations which were determined by the plans of the commander. Every historical unity depends on an effective or fictive centre of value; the "style" of an epoch would not be discernible unless a unifying principle of selection were assumed at its centre, or a "spirit of the age" which serves as a standard for judging the value-positing and style-creating forces in operation. Or, to fall back on a hackneyed expression, culture is a value-formation, culture can be conceived of only in terms of style, and in order to be conceivable at all it needs the assumption of a style- and value-producing "culture-spirit" at the centre of that circle of values which it represents.

Does this mean that all values are made relative? That one must abandon all hope of the logical Absolute ever manifesting itself in reality through the unifying of thought and being? that one must abandon all hope of ever even drawing near to the path that leads to the self-liberation of the spirit and of humanity?

Second Thesis:

the ripeness for history or for biography of the value-positing action is conditioned by the absoluteness of the Logos. For the actual or fictive value-positing subject can be imagined only in the isolation of its selfhood, in that inevitable, complete, and Platonic isolation whose pride it is to depend exclusively on the precepts of logic, and whose compulsion it is to state all activity in terms of logical plausibility; but this

means that one must postulate, in the complete Kantian sense, not only the good will which shapes the work for the work's sake, but also the rule that all consequences must be drawn from the autonomous code of the Self, so that the work, uninfluenced by any dogma, shall spring from the pure originality of the Self and of its law. In other words, whatever does not arise purely in accordance with its own laws vanishes out of history. But however contemporary this individual force of law may be in any age, that is to say, however it may be conditioned by the spirit and style of its age, it can never be anything else than a reflection of the superposed Logos, of that Logos which is active to-day and which is thought itself, a merely earthly reflection, it is true, even in our day, but a reflection through which there gleams that which has a lasting claim to transcend all ages and alone makes it possible for stylized thinking to be projected into another ego. And this formal ultimate unity is continuously and with complete clearness revealed again and again in the narrower sphere of created work and of generally applied æsthetics, for instance in all art, but most obviously in the undying persistence of art forms.

From this we can draw the following comprehensive conclusion, the

Third Thesis:

the world is a product[1] of the intelligible Self, for the Platonic idea has never been abandoned nor ever can be. But this product is not projected "like a bullet from a pistol," for nothing can be posited but value-making subjects, which in their turn reflect the structure of the intelligible Self and in their turn fashion their own value-products, their own world-formations: the world is not an immediate but a mediate product of the Self, it is "a product of products," "a product of products of products," and so on in infinite iteration. This process, the positing of "products of products," provides the world with its methodological organization and hierarchy, a relative organization, certainly, but yet absolute in form, since the ethical imperative postulated for the effective or fictive value-positing subjects remains undiminished in its force, together with the immanent validity of the Logos within the created product: the logic of things remains unshaken. And even though the logical advance of history must be arrested time and again whenever it reaches the limits of infinity inherent in its metaphysical construction, and though the Platonic view of the world must time and again make way for a positivistic examination of data, yet the reality of the Platonic idea remains invincible, for with every access of Positivism it merely touches its mother earth again to rise anew, upborne by the bathos of experience.

Every conceptually comprehensible unity in the world is "product of a product," every concept, every thing; and this methodological function of knowledge, of knowledge as an integrator that can comprehend a thing only by regarding it as an autonomous and value-positing subject, probably extends right into mathematics, thus abolishing the distinction between mathematical scientific abstraction and empirical abstraction. For, methodologically regarded, to define a thing as the "product of a product" is nothing else than to introduce the ideal observer into the field of observation, as has been already done long since by the empirical sciences (by physics, for example, in the Theory of Relativity) quite independently of epistemological considerations: and further, research into mathematical first principles, pursuing the questions "what is number?" and "what is unity?" has reached a point at which it has found itself compelled to accept intuition as the only way out of its difficulties: now the principle of "product of a product" provides intuition with its logical legitimation, for the infiltration of the Self into a hypostatized value-positing subject can be justifiably termed the methodological structure of the act of intuition.

That this principle has been so long unrecognized may perhaps be explained by its obviousness, even its primitiveness. For it is indeed primitive. And the pride of man seems to find insuperable difficulty in admitting the validity of a primitive attitude. For even though this view of everything as the "product of a product" guarantees the presence of the intelligible self in every object throughout the world, yet, if one ignores for a moment this Platonic background, it amounts to a kind of animism that reanimates the whole of nature, nay, the whole of the world in its totality, an animism that introduces a value-subject into everything, into every concept however abstract, and that can be compared only to the animism of primitive peoples: it seems as if the development of logic has an ontogenesis of its own that keeps alive, even in the most highly developed logical structures, all previous and apparently obsolete thought-formations, including that of the simple animism which shortened to one link all chains of plausibility; an ontogenesis that preserves in every new advance of thought the form if not the content of primitive metaphysics—indubitably a stumbling-block for the rationalists, but a consolation to pantheistic feeling.

And yet there is consolation even for the rationalists. For if the principle of "product of products" in its dependence on the governing Logos may be interpreted as the logical structure of the intuitive act, it may also be regarded as the "condition of possible experience" for the otherwise inexplicable fact of the mutual understanding between man and man, between one isolated self and another; so it provides not only an epistemological structure that accounts for the translatableness of all languages, be they ever so different from each other, but far beyond that, infinitely far, it provides in the unity of thought a common

denominator for all human speech, a warrant for the unity of mankind and of a humanity that even in its self-laceration remains the image of God—for in every thought and in every unity that man creates, the Logos, mirror of himself, shines out upon him, the Word of God shines out as the measure of all things. And even if all that is created in this world were to be annihilated, if all its æsthetic values were abolished and resolved into a function, dissolved in scepticism of all law, nay more, in the imperative duty to question and to doubt, there would yet survive untouched the unity of thought, the ethical postulate, the rigorous operation of ethical value as pure function, the real duty of its most strict observance: all these would survive and with them a continuing unity of the world, a unity of mankind, illuminating all things, still surviving and imperishable through all eternities of space and time.

[1]Product = Setzung.

CHAPTER LXXIV

Dr Flurschütz was helping Jaretzki to fit on his artificial arm. Sister Mathilde too was in attendance.

Jaretzki was jerking at the straps:

"Well, Flurschütz, aren't you heart-broken that I'm leaving you so soon … not to speak of Sister Mathilde!"

"Do you know, Jaretzki, I would really like to keep you here for a while longer under observation … you're at a highly questionable stage of your development."

"Can't say … wait a minute," Jaretzki endeavoured to wedge a cigarette between the fingers of the artificial hand, "… wait a minute, how would it do if we added a kind of cigarette-receiver to this … or a permanent cigarette-holder … that would be quite an ingenious idea …?"

"Stand still just for a minute, Jaretzki," Flurschütz fastened the straps, "… there, how do you feel?"

"Like a newly-born machine … a machine at a fine stage of development … if the cigarettes were better it would be still finer."

"Couldn't you let this smoking of yours alone altogether … and the other thing too, of course."

"Love? Oh yes, like a shot."

Sister Mathilde said quite superfluously:

"No, Dr Flurschütz meant that you should give up drinking."

"Oh, I see, I didn't understand … when one is sober, it's so hard to understand things.… I'm surprised that that has never struck you, Flurschütz: it's only when people are drunk that they can understand one another."

"That's a daring attempt at self-justification!"

"But just cast your mind back, Flurschütz, and remember how gloriously drunk we all were in August 1914 … it seems to me as though that was the first and the last time that people felt a real sense of fellowship."

"Scheler says something like that.…"

"Who?"

"Scheler. *The Genius of War* … not much of a book."

"Oh, I see, a book … that doesn't count … but I tell you this, Flurschütz, and I say it in all seriousness: give me some other, some new drunkenness, it doesn't matter what as far as I'm concerned, morphia or patriotism or communism or anything else that makes a man drunk … give me something to make me feel we're all comrades again, and I'll give up drinking … to-morrow."

Flurschütz reflected; then he said:

"There's something in what you say … but if you must have intoxication and fellowship, there's a simple enough remedy: fall in love."

"Under doctor's orders, certainly … have you ever fallen in love under doctor's orders, Sister?"

Sister Mathilde blushed; two red patches appeared amid the freckles that covered her neck.

Jaretzki averted his eyes:

"A bad stage of development for falling in love … it seems to me we're all in a bad way … even love's no more use …" he tested the joints of the artificial arm, "… we should really be given instructions for using this thing … there must surely be a special joint for cuddling somewhere in it."

Flurschütz strangely enough felt shocked. Perhaps because Sister Mathilde was present. Sister Mathilde blushed still more deeply:

"What ideas you have, Herr Jaretzki!"

"How? they're quite good ideas … artificial limbs for making love … yes, quite a splendid idea, special models for staff officers, from colonels upwards … I'll set up a factory."

Flurschütz said:

"Must you always play the *enfant terrible?*"

"Not at all, I simply have ideas for the armament industry … now let's take it off." Jaretzki began to undo the straps; Sister Mathilde helped him. He straightened the joints of the metallic fingers: "There, now it only needs a glove … little finger, ring finger and that's the thumb that picks out the plum."

Flurschütz examined the scars on the naked arm stump.

"I think it fits quite all right, only be careful at the beginning that it doesn't rub your arm sore."

"Let the good charwomen rub and scrub … this one picks out the plums."

"Well, Jaretzki, as far as you're concerned at any rate, there really seems no hope of common understanding."

CHAPTER LXXV

Huguenau's dodging Esch at the dinner-hour had of course availed nothing. That very same evening there was a violent scene. Nevertheless Esch was soon disarmed, for Huguenau not only took his stand in his documented rights as a publisher, which fully authorized him to insert any article that he liked, but he also employed Esch's own arguments: "My dear friend," he jeered, "you've complained often enough about people queering your pitch when you wanted to unmask public abuses … but when someone else has the courage actually to do it you draw in your horns … of course one doesn't fling away the favour of a high and mighty Town Commandant in a hurry … must always trim your coat to suit the fashion, what?" Yes, Esch had to listen to things like that, and although it was a vile and cowardly attack with which the fellow had taken him in the rear, he could find nothing better as a retort but guttersnipe abuse, and after that had held his tongue.

But Huguenau had thereupon adroitly changed his tactics. He had gone to Frau Esch and complained bitterly that her husband had treated abominably a conscientious partner, simply because said partner had conscientiously and selflessly tried to do his duty. That had not been without its effect, and when next day Esch came up to his dinner he found a sulky and offended Huguenau and a wife who with conciliating words spoke up for Herr Huguenau's innocence, so that before they knew where they were they were reconciled and all supped their soup in peace together, much to the satisfaction of Frau Esch, who was anxious not to lose a patron so generous with his praise.

But perhaps Esch too was actually glad that he had avoided having to show Huguenau the door: one couldn't tell what attacks against the Major this fellow might still have in mind … it was best in any case not to let him out of one's sight. So Huguenau stayed where he was, although these meals were none too sociable, especially as Esch now took to glaring at Huguenau across the dishes, mustering him with suspicious eyes.

To Huguenau's credit it must be said that he did his best to brighten matters: but his efforts met with scant success. Even a week later Esch was still in his most bearish mood. And to the hesitant inquiries of his spouse he replied only in a growl: "Emigrate to America.…" After which nothing more was said. Finally, however, Huguenau leant back satiated, and broke the uncomfortable silence with these auspicious words:

"Mother Esch," he said, lifting one finger, "Mother Esch, I've hunted up a farmer who will deliver flour to us, maybe a gammon occasionally too."

"Indeed?" said Esch mistrustfully, "where have you picked him up?"

Of course this farmer was non-existent, but what is non-existent may one day come to life, and Huguenau was annoyed that his good will was never recognized. Yet he did not want to get into a squabble with Esch so soon again, on the contrary he wanted to say something conciliatory:

"We must lighten things a little for Mother Esch if we can … four mouths … I'm surprised that she manages it at all … for one must count in the kid as well."

Esch smiled:

"Yes, the little one."

Huguenau said forthcomingly:

"Where has she been hiding herself?"

Frau Esch sighed:

"You're right, nowadays it's no trifle to fill four mouths … it would have been better if my husband hadn't saddled us with the worry of the child."

"I refuse to listen to a word about that," Esch burst out. He looked angrily across at his wife, who sat there with a curiously frigid smile, as though conscious of guilt. Esch was somewhat mollified: "When there's no new life, everything's dead."

"That's so," said Frau Esch, "that's so."

Huguenau said:

"But she runs about the streets all day … with the boys; you mark my words, she'll run away yet."

"Oh, it suits her quite well to stay with us," said Frau Esch. And Esch, almost warily, almost as though he were touching a pregnant woman, gripped his wife above the elbow by the thick arm: "And I say that she likes to stay with us, do you hear?"

Huguenau was exasperated by the two of them. He said:

"It suits me too to stay with you, Mother Esch … wouldn't you like to adopt me as well?" He would have liked to add that Esch then would have the son that he was always raving about and that was to build the house—but for some reason incomprehensible even to himself he felt deeply indignant, and the whole business seemed to him no longer a matter for jest. If Esch had suddenly sprung up and threatened him Huguenau would not have been surprised. No doubt about it, it would be better to slip away and look for Marguerite; she would probably be down in the courtyard. The best thing would be to fly from the place and take Marguerite with him.

Frau Esch too seemed terrified by the unreasonable request that Huguenau had made to her. She felt her arm clasped by her husband's bony hand, and with her mouth open she stared at Huguenau, who meanwhile had risen; only when he had reached the door did she stammer: "And why not, Herr Huguenau?…"

Huguenau heard her, but it did not lessen his bitter indignation against Esch. He found Marguerite below and presented her with a whole mark. "For your travels," he said, "but you must dress yourself properly for going away … warm knickers … let me see … it seems to me you're almost naked … in autumn it's cold."

CHAPTER LXXVI

It was already past nine when Dr Kessel's door-bell rang. Kühlenbeck was sitting in the corner of the sofa smoking his cigar: "Well, Kessel, is this another patient?" "What else can it be?" replied Kessel, who had risen automatically, "what else … not a single night that one can sleep in peace." And he walked wearily into the next room to fetch his bag.

Meanwhile the maid had come up: "Herr Doctor, Herr Doctor, the Herr Major is below." "Who?" shouted Kessel from the next room. "The Herr Major." "It must be something for me," said Kühlenbeck. "I'm coming at once," cried Kessel, and, his black bag still in his hand, he hurried out to receive the guest.

Presently the Major appeared in the doorway; he smiled a little awkwardly:

"I knew that you two gentlemen were here together … and as you so kindly invited me once, Herr Doctor Kessel … I thought that you two gentlemen were perhaps having a musical evening."

"Well, thank God there's nothing happened. I thought something had gone wrong again," said Kühlenbeck, "… well, all the better."

"No, nothing has gone wrong," said the Major.

"No more revolts?" said Kühlenbeck, with his usual tactlessness, and went on: "Who really was it that put that idiotic article in the *Herald*? Esch, or that clown with the French name?"

The Major did not reply; he had been unpleasantly affected by Kühlenbeck's question. He regretted having come. Kühlenbeck however went on:

"Well, prison can't be exactly comfortable for these gentry … but they're safely away from the Front and that should be enough to keep them contented. They must have forgotten what a sheer stroke of luck it is to be alive, simply to live, no matter how shabbily … human beings have short memories."

"These newspaper people," said the Major, although it was not a real answer at all.

"I was afraid that it was another summons to a patient," said Kessel, "it's to be hoped that there won't be anybody to-night."

Kühlenbeck went on talking:

"An unheard-of luxury for the State to keep prisons going these days … superfluous in any case … the whole world is a prison … but it can't last for much longer … besides the prison here should have been evacuated long ago … what will we do with these people when we've all got to shift?"

"It hasn't come to that yet," said the Major, "and with God's help it won't come to that either." He said this, but he did not believe it. Only that afternoon he had received another secret order with instructions in case of the possible evacuation of the town. Orders and counter-orders were coming in pell-mell and one did not know what the next hour would bring. It was a veritable pit.

Kühlenbeck regarded his great capable surgeon's hands.

"If the French come across here … take my word for it, we'll strangle them with our bare hands."

Kessel said:

"Sometimes I think it a good thing that my wife is not alive to see these times." He gazed at the

photograph which hung over the piano surrounded by a wreath of immortelles and a band of *crêpe*.

The Major too gazed up at it: “Your wife was musical too?” he asked at last. Beside the piano stood the ’cello in a grey-linen case on whose cover a red lyre and two crossed flutes were embroidered. Why had he come here? Why had he come to see these doctors? did he feel ill? and he couldn’t stand doctors, they were all Freethinkers and unreliable. Had no sense of honour. There sat the Surgeon-Major with his head laid back on the corner of the sofa, blowing smoke rings up towards the ceiling, sticking his pointed beard into the air. It was all unseemly. Why had he come here? yet better to be here all the same than in the lonely hotel bedroom, or in the dining-hall where any moment that fellow Huguenau might appear. Kessel had rung for another bottle of Berncastler, and the Major hastily drank a glass. Then he said: “I thought that you would be having some music.”

Kessel smiled absently:

“Yes, my wife was very musical.”

Kühlenbeck said:

“What do you say, Kessel? why not fetch out your ’cello for once? … it will do us all good.”

The Major felt that Kühlenbeck was wanting to show him a kindness, even if it was perhaps a little too familiar of him. So he merely said: “Yes, that would be splendid.”

Kessel went over to the ’cello and with a glance at the photograph took out the instrument. But then he stopped: “Yes, but who will play the accompaniment for me?”

“You’ll manage all right by yourself, Kessel,” said Kühlenbeck, “pluck does it.” Kessel still hesitated a little: “Yes, but what shall I play?” “Something with feeling,” said Kühlenbeck, and Kessel drew in a chair and seated himself beside the piano, as though there were someone there accompanying him; he struck a note, ran his hand tenderly over the strings of the bow and tuned the instrument. Then he closed his eyes.

He played Brahms’ ’cello sonata in E flat, Op. 38. His mild face had a curious inward look, the grey moustache above his compressed lips was no longer a moustache, but a grey shadow, the furrows in his cheeks had altered their contours, it was no longer a face, it was almost invisible, perhaps a grey autumnal landscape waiting for the snow to come. And even when a tear trickled down his nose, it was no longer a tear. Only the hand was still a hand, and it was as though the stroke of the bow had drawn all life into itself, rising and falling on the waves of the soft brown stream of sound which became broader and broader, flowing round and enclosing the player, so that he was cut off and very alone. He played. Probably he was only a dilettante, but that could well be a matter of indifference to him, as it was for the Major and even perhaps for Kühlenbeck: for the clamorous silence of that time, its tumult of dumb impenetrable noise raised up between one human being and another, a wall through which the human voice cannot penetrate, so that it has to falter and die—the terrifying silence of that time was cancelled, Time itself was cancelled and shaped itself into space which enclosed them all while Kessel’s ’cello rang out, uprearing sound, upbuilding space, fulfilling space, fulfilling them also.

When the music had died away and Dr Kessel once more became Dr Kessel, the Major gave himself a little jerk so as to conceal his emotion under a prescribed military bearing. And he waited for Kessel now to say something comforting—surely one might say it now! But Dr Kessel merely bent his head and one could see the meagre locks—not at all like Esch’s grey stiff brush of hair—that sparsely covered the top of his head. Almost with shame he put the instrument away, shoving it into its linen case, which gave one almost an unseemly impression, and Kühlenbeck from his sofa corner merely muttered “Ay.” Perhaps they were all three ashamed.

At last Kühlenbeck said:

“Ay, doctors are a musical lot.”

The Major searched his memory. In his youth he had had a friend, or was it a friend? who had played the violin, but he was not a doctor, although he … perhaps, indeed, he was a doctor or had wanted to be one. Memory stopped there, memory froze, movement froze, and the Major saw nothing but his own bare hand resting on the black cloth of his army trousers. And independently of his own will his lips said “Naked and exposed.…”

“I beg your pardon!” said Kühlenbeck.

The Major turned towards him: “Oh, nothing … these are bad times … I thank you, Herr Doctor Kessel.”

Now Kessel said at last:

“Yes, music is a comfort in these times … there’s not much else left in the way of comfort.”

Kühlenbeck brought his hand down on the table:

“Don’t whine, Kessel … for let the world be full of devils, we dare not despair … let peace only come and we’ll raise our heads again.”

The Major shook his head:

“Against foul treachery one is powerless.” The image of Esch rose before him, that tanned brown face

with the challenging smile, yes, challenging was the right word, that face which nevertheless seemed somehow to be asking for forgiveness and now had the reproachful expression of a horse that has fallen and cannot get up again.

"We Germans have always been betrayed," said Kühlenbeck, "and we're still alive in spite of it." He raised his glass: "Long live Germany!"

The Major too raised his glass, and he thought, "Germany," thought of the order and security which Germany had hitherto meant to him. He could no longer see Germany. In some way or other he held Huguenau responsible for the misfortunes of the Fatherland, for the marching through of troops, for the contradictory orders of the Army Command, for the unchivalrous weapons of this war of gas, for the growing and general disorder. And he would actually have liked the image of Esch to melt and blend into one with that of Huguenau, proving that they were both emissaries of the Evil One, both adventurers who had emerged out of that inextricable turmoil filled with business affairs and faces which one did not understand, both unreliable and contemptible, loaded with guilt, demoniacally loaded with guilt for the disastrous conclusion of the war:

Kessel said:

"I'm finished with it.… I'll do my duty, but I'm finished with it."

An inextricable maze was life, the net of evil lay over the world, and the dumb, stupendous din had begun again. Whoever strayed from the strict path of evangelical Christian duty was a sinner, and the hope that divine grace might fulfil itself here below had been a sinful hope, though proclaimed by the voice of the friend who had shattered the silence and rigidity that encased him and released him from his isolation in a blissful outpouring of the soul. And the Major said: "We have strayed from the path of duty and must bear the penalty."

"Well, well, Herr Major," laughed Kühlenbeck, "I don't agree with you there, but I do agree that it's time we were striking the path for home, so that our exhausted friend Kessel may get to his little bed." He had got up, his army coat hung somewhat loosely on his massive body. A disguised civilian, the Major could not help thinking—that wasn't the King's uniform. Major von Pasenow had also risen. Why had he come here, he, an officer in the King's uniform? Earthly duty was a reflection of divine ordinance, and the service of something greater than oneself obliged a man to subordinate his life to higher ideas, demanded from him that he should give up even the last thin strip of personal freedom left him, if it was necessary. Voluntary obedience, yes, that was the attitude laid down by God; all the rest was to be regarded as non-existent. The Major pulled down his coat so that it hung straight, touched the ribbon of his Iron Cross, and in the punctilious military correctness with which he took his leave he found again that serenity and security which duty and a uniform bestow on men.

Dr Kessel had escorted them downstairs. At the door the Major said with a certain formality: "I thank you, Herr Doctor Kessel, for the artistic treat which you have given us." Kessel hesitated a little in replying and then he said in a low voice: "I should thank you, Herr Major … this is the first time since the death of my dear wife that I have touched my 'cello." The Major, however, did not hear and merely held out his hand with a certain stiffness. He went with Kühlenbeck through narrow streets, they crossed the market-place, a thin autumnal rain blew slantingly in their faces, they both wore the grey overcoat of an officer, both wore officers' caps, and yet they were not comrades in the King's uniform. The Major noted this inwardly.

CHAPTER LXXVII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (14)

Perceptions which are attained through fastings and self-mortifications certainly lack a final logical sharpness. I think I may say with certainty that about this time a change took place in my perceptive states. I regarded this transformation, however, with the utmost distrust, as it went hand in hand with long-continued under-nourishment; indeed I was almost prepared to agree with Dr Litwak's diagnosis and admit that I was sick, especially as the change consisted in a feeling of great physical lucidity rather than in a sharpening of my perception of the world round me. For instance if I put the old question to myself whether my life still possessed any intelligible reality, it was this physical feeling that provided me with the answer and gave me the certitude of living in a sort of second-grade reality, giving rise to a kind of unreal reality, of real unreality, which sent through me a thrill of strange gladness. It was a state, as it were, hovering between knowledge not yet grasped and knowledge grasped, a symbol that had found another symbol for itself, a sleepwalking that led towards the light, a fear that annulled itself and yet rose reborn again from itself; it was like a hovering above the sea of death, a winged rising and falling over the waves without touching them, so light had I become,—it was an almost physical intuition by which I seized the higher

Platonic reality of the world, and all my being was filled with the certainty that I needed take only a small step to transform this physical intuition into a rational one.

In this wavering reality things streamed towards me and streamed into me and I had no need to raise a finger. What had formerly looked like passivity now found its meaning. If formerly I had stayed inside to give free rein to my thoughts, to hold philosophical monologues and now and then to jot down the heads of them, now I stayed in my room like an invalid who is obedient to his doctor and his malady. Everything turned out as Dr Litwak had prophesied. He visits me now regularly, and sometimes I myself actually call him in; and when, suddenly changing his opinion, he sets out to prove to me that I am not ill at all, "You're just a little anæmic and more than half-crazy," he seems to be right in that too, for I feel as though there were very little blood in my veins. I don't want to think any longer, not, however, because I would be incapable of it; no, I don't think any longer simply because I despise thinking. It is not that I have become so very wise as all that, I make no claim whatever to have reached the final plane of knowledge, or to have surmounted knowledge—alas, I know too well that I am far below the plane of knowledge; what keeps me from thinking is rather the fear of losing this hovering state, a fear that conceals itself behind contempt for the word. Or is it the suddenly awakened conviction that the unity of thought and being can be realized only within the most modest limits? Both thought and being reduced to their minimum!

Marie sometimes visits me, brings me gifts of food as she does to her other invalids, and I accept them. Recently she arrived when Litwak and Nuchem were with me. According to her normal custom she greeted them with a friendly "God bless you" and Litwak responded with his usual answer: "A hundredfold." Marie coughed and he put on a solicitous face: "You should be careful," he said, from which it remained uncertain whether he meant the presumable presence of lung trouble in Marie or the danger of infection to which he saw Nuchem exposed. He offered also to examine Marie free of charge, and when she declined he said: "You should at least go out walking as much as you can in the fresh air … and take him with you, he's anæmic." Nuchem stood about and glanced through my books. For the rest, Litwak was always prescribing new medicines for me, and when he handed me the prescription he would laugh: "You won't take it in any case, but a doctor must prescribe something." We had arrived at a kind of mutual understanding.

What was the point of contact between us? why had I to stay with these people? why had this provisory Jewish domicile become a permanency for me, which I could no longer imagine myself leaving? why did I yield so obediently to those Jews? everything was provisory, these refugees were provisory, yes, so was their whole existence, and Time itself was provisory too, as provisory as the war, which was lingering on past its own end. The provisory seems to have become the definitive; incessantly it cancels itself and yet remains. It pursues us and we come to terms with it, in a Jewish house, in a hostel. But it lifts us above the past, it holds us suspended in a happy, almost euphorian hovering state in which everything looks towards the future.

Finally I obeyed Dr Litwak and went out for walks whenever Nuchem or Marie could accompany me.

These autumn days were very beautiful and I sat with Marie under the trees. And as everything had a radiant candour, and as words were of no consequence, I asked her:

"Are you a fallen woman?"

"I was one," she replied.

"And are you chaste now?"

"Yes."

"You know that you'll never save Nuchem?"

"Yes, I know."

"Then you love him?"

She smiled.

Mirror of itself, symbol of a symbol! to what bourne can the continuous chain of symbols lead us if not to death!

"Listen, Marie, I've made up my mind to kill myself, to shoot myself or jump into the Landwehr Canal … but you must go with me, by myself I won't move a step."

That sounded like a joke, but it was seriously meant. She must have guessed that, for without smiling, almost matter-of-factly, she replied:

"No, I won't do that, and you mustn't kill yourself either."

"But your love for Nuchem is quite hopeless."

She was unable to draw any consequences from that; she simply fixed her eyes questioningly on me, searching for the possibility of an understanding between us. Her eyes were colourless.

It was not a very pleasant game that I was playing with her, and yet the understanding between us must have been already established, for she said:

"We are in the joy of the Lord."

I said:

"Nuchem will not kill himself, he daren't, he is under the law, but we are in the joy of the Lord … we can dare to do it."

Perhaps the thought that Nuchem was preserved from all danger of suicide reassured her, for now she smiled again, yes, she even crossed her legs like a lady and the superior complacency of a lady was written on her face:

"We too are under the law."

I could not take offence at her Salvation Army phrases, it may be because while one is in a provisory state every phrase loses its meaning, it may be because then it takes on a new meaning beforehand and fits the case. It may be that words too can hover between the past and the future, that they too hover between the law and the joy of the Lord, taking refuge from the contempt which is their deserved fate in a new meaning in the unstable flux.

Yet I did not want to hear anything about the law, for it had recalled me back to reality; I did not want to hear anything about the law, I wanted to maintain intact my own state of suspension, and I asked:

"You're happy, in spite of your hopeless love?"

"Yes," she said.

Irretrievably lost is our home, inaccessibly stretches the distance before us, but our grief is eased more and more, becomes more and more transparent, perhaps even invisible; nothing remains but a painful echo of what has once been. And Marie said:

"The sorrow in the world is great, but the joy of the Lord is greater."

I said:

"Oh, Marie, you have known what estrangement is and yet you are happy … and you know that death alone, that your last moment alone, will annul that estrangement, and yet you desire to live."

She replied:

"Whoever lives in Christ is never alone … come to us."

"No," I said, "I belong to my Jewish quarters, I'm going to Nuchem."

But that no longer made any impression on her.

CHAPTER LXXVIII

A man whose arms have been amputated is a torso. This thought was the bridge which Hanna Wendling was accustomed to employ when she endeavoured to find her way back from the general to the individual and the concrete. And at the end of this bridge stood not Heinrich, but, swaying a little, Jaretzki with his empty sleeve tucked into the pocket of his army coat. It took a long time before she was able to recognize this fancy clearly, and still longer before she grasped that it might in some way correspond to an actual reality. And then another considerable time passed before she summoned the decision to ring up Dr Kessel.

This extremely retarded process was certainly not caused by a particularly strong moral sense; no, it was simply that she had lost any feeling for time or tempo, it was a slowing down of the life-stream, yet not at all a damming up of it, but rather an evaporation into nothingness, an oozing away into a completely porous ground, a vanishing without remembrance of her thoughts as she thought them. And when Dr Kessel as arranged called for her in his buggy to take her to the town, it seemed to her that she had called in the doctor on account of some strange anxiety, which she could not formulate, about her son, and only with an effort did she manage to get her memory to work. Then, it is true, she asked at once in sudden apprehension, which she immediately forgot again—they were just crossing the garden—who the one-armed lieutenant in the hospital really was. Dr Kessel was at a loss for a moment, but when he had helped her into the buggy and groaning a little sat down beside her he suddenly recollected: "Of course, you mean Jaretzki, of course … poor young fellow, he's to be sent to an institution for nervous cases now, I believe." With which the Jaretzki episode was finished for Hanna. She dispatched her purchases in the town, sent off a parcel to Heinrich, absolved a visit to Röders. She had asked Walter to meet her there; then they were to walk home together. Her inexplicable anxieties about Walter were all at once gone. It was a mild and peaceful autumn evening.

It would not have been surprising if Hanna Wendling had dreamt that night of a Greek torso buried in the river mud or a block of marble or—even that would have sufficed—a pebble washed by the stream. But as she remembered no such dream it would be neither honest nor relevant to express any opinion on the matter. On the other hand it is certain that she passed a restless night and often awoke and peered across at the open window, waiting for the venetian blinds to be raised and the masked head of a burglar to appear. Next morning she thought of furnishing the storeroom beside the kitchen for the use of the gardener and his wife, so that there should be at any rate a man in the house whom one could summon in case of anything

happening, but she rejected the plan, for the weakly little gardener would be really no protection, and all that remained was a residue of violent indignation against Heinrich for putting the gardener's house at such a distance from the villa; also he had neglected to have bars fixed over the windows. Yet she herself had to admit that all this uneasiness had hardly anything to do with real fear; it was not so much fear as a sort of exasperation at the lonely and isolated position of the villa, and although Hanna would certainly have felt and expressed a repugnance to any house where she was in closer contact with her neighbours, yet the empty space which surrounded the villa was so empty, the dead landscape, which looked as though it had been patched together out of scraps and bits, was so dead, that it became as it were a ring of vacancy which coiled itself more and more closely round her loneliness, a ring which could be broken only by a violent stroke, by bursting it, by an assault from inside or an invasion from outside. Shortly before she had read something in the newspaper about the Russian Revolution and the soviets, under the heading "The Invasion from Below"; she had remembered this phrase during the night and it returned again and again to her mind like the refrain of a popular song. In any case it would be well to get an estimate for affixing bars to the windows from Krahl the locksmith.

The nights grew longer and the cold moon lay in the sky like a pebble. In spite of the piercing cold Hanna could not summon up the resolution to close the window. Still more than the appearance of a noiseless burglar she dreaded the crash that would be made if the window panes were forced in, and this strange tension, which was not actually fear, yet was on the point at any moment of toppling over into panic, betrayed her into quasi-romantic gestures. So now almost every night she leaned against the open window and gazed out at the dead zone of the autumn, curiously attracted, almost drawn out of herself into the vacancy of the landscape, and her fear, which by that attraction was denuded of all fear, became a light bubble—her heart bore itself as lightly as a flower, and the rigidity of her isolation opened out in the released freedom of her breathing. And that was almost like a blissful infidelity towards Heinrich, it was a state which she experienced as the diametrical opposite of another and past state … yes, but what state? and then she became aware that it was the opposite of what she had once called the physical experience. And the best of it was that at those moments the physical experience was completely forgotten.

CHAPTER LXXIX

Esch's fears were destined to be realized: Huguenau got the Major into fresh trouble. It must be admitted, however, that Huguenau's rôle at first was a passive one.

At the beginning of October there arrived on the Major's desk one of those lists which the Army Command issued from time to time in its attempt to track down all soldiers missing from their regiments, including suspected deserters; and among the names there was that of a certain Wilhelm Huguenau from Colmar, a private in the Fourteenth Fusiliers.

The Major had already laid the list aside when he grew aware that something was bothering him. So he picked it up once more; being far-sighted he held it out at arm's-length, turning it to the light, and read again: "Wilhelm Huguenau," a name that he surely had heard before. He looked up questioningly at the orderly whose duty it was to wait while the day's post was examined; he was just able to see that the man, obviously expecting some order, had drawn himself up at attention, and was just able to collect his strength sufficiently to say, "You may go," but once he was alone he sank forward over the desk with his face buried in hishands,

From this blank confusion he started up with the thought that the orderly was still standing by the door and that the orderly was Esch. At first he did not dare to look and see, but when he finally assured himself that there was no one there he said aloud in the empty room: "Well, it doesn't matter …" as if that settled it. But that did not settle it, the image of Esch still stood by the door gazing at him, gazing at him as if it had just discovered that he was a branded man. It was a stern reproachful look that rested upon him, and the Major was ashamed because he had watched Huguenau dancing. But that remembrance died away and suddenly he heard Esch's voice: "There's always a traitor among us."

"There's always a traitor among us," repeated the Major. A traitor is a dishonourable man, a traitor is a man who betrays his fatherland, a traitor is a man who is false to his fatherland, false to his fatherland and his comrades … a deserter is a traitor. And while in this manner his thoughts were gradually drawing closer to some veiled and hidden preoccupation, suddenly the veil was rent and all at once he knew everything, everything: he himself was the traitor, he himself, the Town Commandant, had allied himself with a deserter and had looked on while the man danced, he had allied himself with a deserter so that he might be invited into an editorial office, so that the deserter might pave the way for him into civilian affairs, into friendships with men who were not comrades … the Major put his hand up to the Iron Cross and tore at its ribbon: a traitor had no right to a decoration, a traitor must be deprived of his decoration, could not be

buried with it on his breast … a deed of dishonour could be paid for only with a pistol bullet … one had to take the punishment on one's own shoulders … and the Major, rigidly immobile, with a frozen look in his eyes, said: "The unchivalrous end."

His hand was still touching the buttons of his uniform; mechanically he assured himself that they were all fastened, and that was a strange reassurance, a kind of hope that one could still return to duty, to one's own secure life, even although Esch's image had not yet vanished. It was a glittering and uncanny image, it stood in the other world and yet in this, it was both good and evil, it was bright and assured and yet had all the unreliability of the civilian, of the man who has his waistcoat open at the neck and lets his shirt be seen. And the Major, his fingers still on his uniform buttons, drew himself up, smoothed the wrinkles out of his coat, passed his hand over his forehead and said: "Phantasms."

He would have liked to send for Esch; Esch was the man to clear everything up … he longed to do it, but that would be a fresh deviation from the path of duty, a fresh deviation into civilian affairs. That must not happen. Besides … one must decide things for oneself: all these suspicions might prove groundless … and, on reflection, it was certain that this Huguenau had always behaved in a correct and patriotic manner … perhaps everything would be cleared up yet and turn out well.

With hands that still trembled a little the Major held the list again before his eyes, then he laid it down and addressed himself to the other letters that had come in. Yet, strong as was the effort he made to bring his thoughts under control, it was not strong enough to master the contradictory orders and service instructions before him; he was incapable of resolving the contradictions. Chaos was invading the world on every side and chaos was spreading over his thoughts and over the world, darkness was spreading, and the advance of darkness sounded like the agony of a painful death, like a death-rattle in which only one thing was audible, only one thing certain, the downfall of the Fatherland—oh, how the darkness was rising and the chaos, and out of that chaos, as if from a sink of poisonous gases, there grinned the visage of Huguenau, the visage of the traitor, the instrument of divine wrath, the author of all the encroaching evil.

For two whole days the Major endured the torment of an indecision that the pressure of precipitate events kept him from realizing. In face of the general disorder it would have been quite natural had he simply let the matter drop, for a desertion was of little account; but it was just as natural for the Town Commandant not even to consider the possibility of such an easy way out. For the categorical imperative of duty cannot allow evasion to be piled upon evasion; and on the second day the Major gave instructions for Huguenau to be summoned.

At the sight of the traitor all the Major's repressed disgust broke out with renewed force. Huguenau's friendly greeting he countered with official reserve, and reaching the list across the table pointed silently to the name "Wilhelm Huguenau," which was marked with a red line. Huguenau realized that everything was now at stake, and face to face with imminent danger drew again upon the lucid assurance that had hitherto preserved him. The tone that he adopted was light enough, but behind the flashing eyeglasses the firmness of his look was an indication to the Major that here was a man who knew very well how to defend himself.

"I have been expecting something like this for a long time, my dear Major, the disorder in the army, if you will allow me to say so, is daily increasing … yes, you may shake your head, but so it is; I am, unfortunately, a living witness to it; when I reported at the Central Press Office the sergeant on duty took all my papers from me, in order, as he said, to send particulars to my regiment; I suspected at once that I would have grave difficulties, since it isn't the thing to send a soldier anywhere without his papers—you agree with me there, of course—but I was reassured when they told me that they would send on the papers after me. All that I got was a provisional travelling-permit for Trier, you understand, I had nothing in my pocket but that permit, otherwise I was left to my own resources! Well, and I had to give up the permit, of course, to the military police at the station … that's the whole story. Of course I must admit that I shouldn't have kept on forgetting about it, but you know better than anyone, sir, how overburdened I am with work, and when the authorities are so remiss one can't blame a simple taxpayer who's doing his best to defend his country. At least, one would think so. But instead of setting their own house in order they find it naturally much easier to brand a respectable man as a deserter. If my patriotic duty did not forbid me, sir, I would gladly expose such incredible conduct in the Press!"

All that sounded plausible; the Major was again undecided.

"If I might venture to suggest it, sir, you should take up this line; inform the army police and the regiment—sticking to the truth—that I am in charge here of the official newspaper for the region, and that I shall send on as soon as possible the missing papers, which I shall meanwhile try to procure."

The Major's ill-humour fastened on the phrase "sticking to the truth." What language the man dared to use!

"It's not for you to prescribe to me what reports I am to make. Besides, to stick completely to the truth: I don't believe you!"

“You don’t believe me? Has it perhaps occurred to you, sir, to find out whether the informer who laid this accusation is trustworthy? And that it can be only the work of some informer—and a stupid and malicious one at that—is as clear as daylight.…”

He stared triumphantly at the Major, who, surprised by this new attack, did not even remember that for this particular accusation no informer had been necessary. And triumphantly Huguenau continued:

“How many people, after all, know that I have had trouble about my papers? only one, so far as I know, and that one has often enough abused me as a traitor, pretending that he was speaking in joke, or symbolically, as he chooses to put it; you have only to cast your mind back, sir.… I know these sham-pious jokers … religious mania’s what people call it, and a poor man like me can lose all his money because of it, not to speak of his head.…”

The Major interrupted him with unexpected suddenness; he even rapped on the table with the paper-knife:

“Will you have the goodness to leave Herr Esch out of the question? He is an honourable man.”

Perhaps it was not wise of Huguenau to persist in hanging on, for his house of cards threatened every minute to collapse. He knew that, but something within him said “va banque” and he could not do otherwise:

“I beg respectfully, sir, to point out that it is you and not I who mention Herr Esch by name. So I’m not mistaken, and he’s the fine informer, is he? Ah, if that’s the way the wind’s blowing, and it’s to please Herr Esch that you do his dirty work for him, then all I ask, my dear sir, is to be arrested.”

This shaft went home. The Major pointed a finger at Huguenau and stammered with difficulty:

“Out you get … out you get … I’ll have you thrown out.”

“As you please, Herr Major … quite as you please. I know what I have to expect from a Prussian officer who adopts such means to remove a witness of his defeatist speeches in communistic gatherings; it’s all very well to trim your sails to the wind, but it’s not my habit to denounce the trimmer.… Salut.”

These last words, which were really sheer nonsense and only added by Huguenau to embellish his rhetoric, were not even heard by the Major. He kept on murmuring tonelessly: “Out you get … he’s to get out … the traitor” long after Huguenau had left the room and disrespectfully banged the door behind him. It was the end, the unchivalrous end! he was branded for ever!

Was there still a way of escape? no, there was none … the Major drew his army revolver from the drawer of his desk and laid it before him. Then he took a sheet of letter-paper and laid it also before him; it was to be his petition for a successor to relieve him. He would have preferred simply to ask to be cashiered in disgrace. But the punctual performance of official duties must go on. He would not leave his place until he had handed everything over in a regular manner.

Although the Major believed that he was doing all this with prompt and soldier-like dispatch, his actions were extremely slow and every movement cost him a painful effort. And it was with an intense effort that he began to write: he wanted to write with a firm hand. Perhaps the very intensity of the strain he put upon himself prevented him from getting further than the first words: “To the …” he had traced upon the paper, in letters that seemed unrecognizable even to himself, and there he stuck—the pen-nib was splintered, it had torn the paper and made an ugly splutter. And firmly, even convulsively, clutching the pen-handle the Major slowly crumpled up, no longer a Major but a worn old man. He attempted again to dip the broken nib into the ink but without success, he only knocked over the inkpot, and the ink ran in a narrow stream over the top of the desk and trickled on to his trousers. The Major paid no attention to it. He sat there with ink-stained hands and stared at the door through which Huguenau had vanished. But when some time later the door opened and the orderly appeared he managed to sit up and stretch out his arm commandingly: “Get out,” he ordered the somewhat flustered man, “get out … I am staying at my post.”

CHAPTER LXXX

Jaretzki had gone off with Captain von Schnaack. The sisters were still standing in front of the gate waving after the carriage that was taking both men to the station. When they turned to re-enter the house Sister Mathilde looked peaked and old-maidish. Flurschütz said:

“It was really terribly decent of you to take him under your wing last night … the fellow was in an awful state … where on earth did he get hold of the vodka?”

“An unfortunate man,” said Sister Mathilde.

“Have you ever read *Dead Souls*?”

“Let me think … I believe I have.…”

“Gogol,” said Sister Carla, with the pride of ready information, “Russian serfs.”

“Jaretzki is a dead soul,” said Flurschütz, then, after a pause, pointing to a group of soldiers in the

garden, "… that's what they all are, dead souls … probably all of us, too; it's touched all of us somewhere."

"Can you lend me the book?" asked Sister Mathilde.

"I don't have it here … but we can get hold of it … as for books … do you know, I can't read anything now…."

He had sat down on the seat beside the porch and was staring at the road, at the mountains, at the clear autumnal sky that was darkening in the north. Sister Mathilde hesitated a moment, then she too sat down.

"You know, Sister, we really need to discover some new means of communication, something beyond speech … all that is written and said has become quite dumb and meaningless … something new is needed, or else our chief is absolutely in the right with his surgery…."

"I don't quite understand," said Sister Mathilde.

"Oh, it's not worth bothering about, it's just … I only meant that if our souls are dead there's nothing for it but the surgical knife … but that's just nonsense."

Sister Mathilde thought of something:

"Didn't Lieutenant Jaretzki say something like that when his arm had to be amputated?"

"Very possibly he did, he's infected with radicalism too … of course he couldn't be anything but radical … like every trapped animal…."

Sister Mathilde was shocked by the word "animal":

"I believe he was only trying to forget everything … he once hinted at that; and all that drinking …"

Flurschütz had pushed his cap back; he felt the scar on his forehead and passed his finger over it.

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if we were entering on a time when people will do nothing but try to forget, only to forget: to sleep and eat and sleep and eat … just like our fellows here … to sleep and eat and play cards…."

"But that would be dreadful, to live without ideals!"

"My dear Sister Mathilde, what you are seeing here is scarcely the war, it's only a miniature edition of the war … you haven't been out of this place for four years … and all the men keep a shut mouth even when they're wounded … keep a shut mouth and forget about it … but you can take my word for it, not one of them has brought back any ideals."

Sister Mathilde got up. The thunder-clouds were now outlined against the clear sky like a broad black wall.

"I'm going to apply for a field hospital again as soon as I can," he said.

"Lieutenant Jaretzki believes that the war is never going to come to an end."

"Yes … perhaps that's just why I want to get out there again."

"I suppose I ought to go out there too…."

"Oh, you're doing your bit here, Sister."

Sister Mathilde looked up at the sky.

"I must bring in the deck-chairs."

"Yes, you'd better do that, Sister."

CHAPTER LXXXI

It was Saturday; Huguenau was paying out the week's wages in the printing-room.

Life had gone on in the usual manner; not for a moment had it occurred to Huguenau that as an openly advertised deserter who was already being tracked down he really should take to flight. He had simply stayed where he was. Not only because he was already too much bound up with local affairs, not only because a business conscience cannot bear to see any enterprise abandoned in which a considerable sum of money has been invested, whether one's own or another's—it was rather a feeling of general indefiniteness that kept him where he was and prevented him from admitting defeat, a feeling that compelled him to assert his reality against that of the others. And though it was somewhat nebulous, yet it resolved itself into a very definite idea: that the Major and Esch would get together behind his back and sneer at him. So he stayed where he was, only making an agreement with Frau Esch that meals he did not consume were to be made up to him, thus enabling him to avoid without material loss the hateful midday dinners.

Of course he knew that the trend of affairs was not favourable to the taking of action against a single insignificant Alsatian deserter; he felt himself relatively secure, and moreover he had positively a strangle-hold on the Major. He knew that, but he preferred not to know it. On the contrary he played with the thought that the luck of war might take another turn, that the Major might again be a power in the land, and that the Major and Esch were only waiting until then to crush him. It was for him to foil them in good time. Maybe it was sheer superstition, but he could not afford to fold his hands, he had to use every minute of his time, he had far too many urgent things to settle; and although he could not have told precisely

whither this urgency was driving him, yet he consoled himself with the reflection that it was only their own fault if he laid counter-mines against his enemies.

Now he was paying out the wages. Lindner regarded the money, counted it over again, looked at it once more and left it lying on the table. The apprentice compositor was standing by, equally silent. Huguenau was puzzled:

"Well, Lindner, why don't you pick up your money?"

Finally, with obvious reluctance, Lindner brought out the words:

"The Union rate's ninety-two pfennings."

That was something new. But Huguenau was not at a loss:

"Yes, yes, in large printing-works … but not in a tight squeeze like this … you're an old, experienced workman and you must know the condition we're in. With enemies on every hand, nothing but enemies' … if I hadn't set the paper on its legs again there wouldn't be any wages at all to-day … that's all the thanks I get. Do you imagine I wouldn't be glad to give you twice as much … but where am I to get it from? Perhaps you think we're a Government paper bolstered up with subsidies … then, of course, there would be some sense in your joining the Union and asking for Union rates. I would join it myself; I'd be much better off."

"I haven't joined the Union," muttered Lindner.

"How do you know the Union rate, then?"

"One soon gets to hear of it."

Huguenau had meanwhile considered the matter. Of course Liebel was at the bottom of this with his workshop propaganda. So he was an enemy too. But Liebel was a man to keep in with for the present. He said therefore:

"Well, we'll manage some arrangement … let's say, from November the new rate, and until then we'll see what can be done."

Both men professed themselves content.

In the evening Huguenau went to the Palatine Tavern to look for Liebel. The Lindner affair was really only a pretext. Huguenau was not at all ill-natured; he looked with clear eyes at the world; only a man has to know who are his enemies so that he can make a change of front when necessary. Oh, he knew well enough who his enemy was. They had managed to shut down the brothel and two outlying pubs … but when he offered to help them in their fight with the real subversive elements the Major had turned tail. Well, to-morrow he would butter the old man up again in the newspaper, this time for having closed the brothel. And Huguenau hummed to himself: "Lord God of Sabaoth."

In the Palatine he found Liebel, Doctor Pelzer, who had volunteered as a private, and a few more. Pelzer asked at once:

"And where have you left Esch? we never see him at all nowadays."

Huguenau grinned:

"Bible class for the Holy Sabbath … he'll be getting himself circumcised next."

They all roared with laughter, and Huguenau swelled with pride. But Pelzer said:

"All the same, Esch is a fine chap."

Liebel shook his head:

"It's almost incredible, the stuff that people swallow…."

Pelzer said:

"It's just in times like these that everyone has his own ideas…. I'm a Socialist, and so are you, Liebel … but that's just why, all the same, Esch is a fine chap…. I like him very much."

Liebel's forehead, which rose up not unlike a tower, reddened, and the vein running over it stood out:

"In my opinion that kind of thing just makes people besotted and should be stopped."

"Quite right," said Huguenau, "destructive ideas."

Someone at the table laughed:

"O Lord, how even the big capitalists are changing their tune!"

Huguenau's eyeglasses flashed at the speaker:

"If I were a big capitalist I wouldn't be sitting here, but in Cologne, if not in Berlin."

"Um, you're not exactly a communist either, Herr Huguenau," said Pelzer.

"Nor that either, my dear Herr Doctor … but I know what's just and what's unjust … who was the first to expose the state of things in the prison? eh?"

"Nobody denies the services you've rendered," conceded Pelzer, "where would we have got such a fine Iron Bismarck but for you?"

Huguenau became genial; he clapped Pelzer on the shoulder:

"Pull your grandmother's leg, my dear fellow!"

But then he proceeded to let himself go:

The services he had rendered were neither here nor there. Of course he had always been a good patriot, of course he had acclaimed the victories of his Fatherland, and would anybody venture to blame him for that? but he had always known very well that that was the only way of rousing the bourgeoisie, who kept a tight hand on their ill-gotten gains, to do something for the children of the poor proletarian victims of the war; as far as he remembered it was he who had managed that! but what thanks had he got? it wouldn't surprise him to find that secret police orders were already out against him! but he wasn't afraid, let them do their worst, he had friends who would get him out of prison if necessary. This secret service work must in any case be put a stop to. "A man disappears, nobody knows how, and the next thing you hear is that he's been buried in the prison yard; God only knows how many are still languishing in prison! No, we don't get justice, we get only police justice! and the worst of it all is the sham piety of these police butchers; they have their Bibles always in their hands, but only to hit people over the head with. And they say grace before and after meat, but other people can starve to death, grace or no grace.…"

Pelzer had listened approvingly, but now he interrupted:

"Seems to me, Huguenau, you're an *agent provocateur.*"

Huguenau scratched his head:

"And do you imagine that I haven't had offers of that kind made to me? if I could only tell you … well, never mind.… I was always an honest man and I'll remain an honest man if it should cost me my head … only I can't stand that sham hypocrisy."

Liebel said in agreement:

"This Bible stuff is only a stunt … the masters simply love to see the people fed on Bible texts."

Huguenau nodded:

"Yes, first a text and then a bullet … there are plenty who had a hand in the shooting affair in the prison … well, I'd better say nothing. But I'd rather go to quod than to one of their Bible classes."

So Huguenau aligned his position in the struggle then beginning between the upper and lower orders. And although Bolshevist propaganda was a matter of complete indifference to him, and he would have been the first to call for help if his own possessions had been in danger, although indeed it was only with great uneasiness that he reported in the *Kur-Trier Herald* the increasing number of inroads on property, yet he said now with honest conviction:

"The Russians are great fellows."

And Pelzer said:

"I believe you, my boy."

As they left the inn Huguenau shook his finger at Liebel:

"You're another of these sham-pious Johnnies … egging on my good old Lindner against me, and yet I'm only working for the people … and you know it, too. Well, I suppose we'll come to an understanding yet."

CHAPTER LXXXII

An eight-year-old child has resolved to wander alone out into the world.

She walks along the narrow strip of grass between the wheel-ruts and sees the pale purple of fading clover-heads that have strayed there, dried cakes of cow-dung, hoary with age, that have grass growing in their cracks, and the prickly burrs that cling to her stockings. She sees many other things too, the meadow-saffron growing in the fields and two dun cows grazing on the valley slopes, and since she cannot be always looking at the landscape she looks also at her frock and sees the little wild roses printed on its black cotton: over and over again a fully opened flower and a bud together on one bright green stalk between two small green leaves; in the middle of the opened rose there is a yellow point. She wishes that she had a black hat in which a rose with a bud and two leaves could be pinned—that would go well with the frock. But she has only a grey woollen cloak with a hood.

As she wanders along the river like this, one hand on her hip and the other clutching a mark to defray her expenses, she is in well-known country. She is not afraid. She walks through the landscape as a housewife might walk through her dwelling, and if the pleasant feeling in her big toe induces her to kick a stone off the strip of grass, that is only a kind of tidying up. All around her everything is clear. She can see the clumps of trees that stand clearly modelled in the transparent air of the early autumn afternoon, and the landscape has no mystery for her: behind the transparent air is the bright blue sky, among the transparent green leafage there appears from time to time, as if it could not be otherwise, a tree with yellow leaves, and often, although there is not a breath of wind, a yellow leaf comes fluttering from somewhere and slowly circling settles on the path.

When she turns her eyes to the right, yonder where the willows and bushes fringe the shore of the river,

she can see the white boulders in the river-bed, she can even see the water; for the foliage of the bushes has thinned out with the autumn and reveals the brown branches, it is no longer the impenetrable green wall of summer. But if she turns her eyes to the left she sees the marsh-meadow: uncanny and malicious it lies there, and if one sets a foot in its grass the water plashes up and seeps into one's shoes; one dare not try to cross a marsh like that, for who knows? one might sink and be smothered in the bog.

Children have a more restricted and yet a more intense feeling for nature than grown-ups. They will never linger at a beautiful prospect to absorb the whole of a landscape, but a tree standing on a distant hill can attract them so strongly that they feel as if they could take it in their mouths and must run to touch it. And when a great valley spreads before their feet they do not want to gaze at it, but to fling themselves into it as if they could fling their own fears in too; that is why children are in such constant and often purposeless movement, rolling in the grass, climbing trees, trying to eat leaves, and finally concealing themselves in the top of a tree or deep in the dark security of a bush.

Much, therefore, of what is generally ascribed to the sheer inexhaustibility of a youth's unfolding powers and to its purposeless yet purposeful exuberance is really nothing else than the naked fear of the creature that has begun to die in realizing its own loneliness; a child rushes to and fro because in so many senses it is wandering about at the beginning of its course; the laughter of a child, so often censured by adults as idle, is the laughter of one who sees himself surprised and mastered by loneliness: so it is not only comprehensible that an eight-year-old may decide to go out into the world in an extraordinary, one might almost say, an heroic and final attempt to concentrate her own loneliness and conquer within that the greater loneliness, to challenge infinity by unity and unity by infinity—not only is that comprehensible, but it is also comprehensible that in an enterprise of this kind the motives influencing her will be neither ordinary nor weighed by ordinary standards; a mere butterfly, that is to say a thing of such little weight that it cannot come into consideration at all, may have a determining influence on the whole course of her adventure—for instance, let the butterfly that has fluttered for some time ahead of her suddenly leave the path to vanish across the marshes, and it is only in the eyes of an adult that that will seem irrelevant, for adults cannot see that it is the soul of the butterfly, not the butterfly itself, and yet itself, that has deserted the child. She comes to a stop; she takes her hand from her hip and with a wild swoop doomed beforehand to failure she tries to catch the creature that is already far away.

She does, indeed, continue on her original path for some time. She comes almost to the great iron bridge that carries across the river the main road from the east towards the town. The path by the shore which she has been following would here climb up the road embankment and cross it to descend on the other side. But the child does not get so far as that. For in face of the familiar bridge with its grey lattice-work that cuts the black pine-forest into multitudinous black rectangles when one looks through it, a sight that has always terrified her, and of the surprising and apparently unending familiarity of the country, she now quite suddenly decides to leave the valley. No sooner thought than done. And even although when she wandered off from home she may have hoped that what was familiar and homelike would vanish only gradually, merging almost painlessly, as it were, into what was strange, yet the painfulness of this sudden farewell to the valley is drowned in her strong desire to cross to the other side of the marsh, to where the butterfly vanished.

It is only a moderately high bluff that rises over there, but it is high enough for the child to see nothing of the house on its summit save the roof, and nothing of the trees that grow there save their tops. Perhaps her most sensible course would be simply to tackle the ascent from the main road. But her impatience is too great: under the bright blue sky, that cool-warm sky of the Indian summer, under the rays of the sun that burn her back, she begins to run; she runs along the edge of the marsh looking for a ford or a raised path, the narrowest of paths will do; but while she is searching she has run right round the marsh and is already at the foot of the hill, just as if the hill had run to meet her like a camel and was kneeling down for her to climb up on it. This twofold haste, her own and that of the hill, is a little uncanny, and she really hesitates now that she is about to set foot on the imperceptible swell that marks the transition from the flat marshland to the steep hill. If she now lifts her head the farmhouse up there has quite vanished from sight and only a few tree-tops are visible. But the higher she clambers the more the little settlement up there grows to meet her eye, first the trees in their rich green as if spring were calling to her, then the roof from which the chimney rises like a candle, and finally the white walls of the house gleam through the trees: it is some kind of farmhouse set in a very green garden, and the last slope, so steep that she scrambles up on all-fours, is likewise so green that she advances her arms until she is stretched flat on her belly, her face in the grass, and only then slowly lets her knees follow.

Now that she is really at the top and the farmyard dog barks and tugs at his chain, the springtime she hoped to find is wanting. The landscape, indeed, is strange and unfamiliar, and even the valley, into which she now casts a glance, even that is no longer the valley out of which she came. A twofold transformation! a

transformation that is certainly heightened by melancholy, but none the less is not decisive, for the transformation can be attributed to the change in the light: with that swiftness peculiar to autumn the clear purity of the light has become opaque and milky, and the whitening shield of the sky looks down on another sky, for the valley is beginning also to fill with cloud that is equally white. It is yet afternoon, ah, yet afternoon, but the evening of strangeness has already invaded it. Far into the infinite distance stretches the road on which the farm is set, and in the quickly mounting cold the butterflies droop and die. And that is decisive! She is suddenly aware that there is no fixed goal for her, that her casting about and seeking for a goal has been in vain, that only the infinite distance itself can be a goal. The child does not formulate this thought, but she answers with her actions the question she has not posed, she flings herself into the strangeness, she flees along the road, she flees along the road that stretches without end, she loses her wits and cannot even weep in her breathless race that is like a suspension of movement between the moveless masses of cloud. And when the evening really steals upon her through the clouds, when the moon becomes a bright patch in the cloudy roof, when the clouds are then washed away by some noiseless force and all the stars are vaulted above her, when the stillness of dusk is superseded by the immobility of night, she finds herself in an unknown village, stumbling through silent alleys in which here and there a cart is standing without its horses.

It is almost a matter of no account how far Marguerite will penetrate, whether she will ever be brought back or whether she will fall a prey to some wandering tramp—the sleepwalking of the infinite has seized upon her and never more will let her go.

CHAPTER LXXXIII

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (15)

O autumn year, O new year of starvation,
O gentle stars that warmed the autumn leaves,
O agony of the long day! agony of barren sheaves,
O agony of farewell,
when in sad resignation
they said farewell,
and in their eyes, grief-stricken,
was nought but tearless seeking to hold fast
that moment of farewell,
the very last:
then in the city where hooting motors thicken
they lost each other's traces, one

by one,
each other's
hearts, and
anguish
veiled the
sun
and turned
the moon
to stone,
yet was not
fear;
for old
men's
wisdom,
shining
silver-clear,
illumined
them until
their
anguish
grew
into the
richest
dower that
they knew.
Was it not
anguish
drew them
first of all
together,
like tired
leaves upon
the way?
And their
love's
anguish,
was it not a
ray
from
Heaven's
own
anguish,
beneath
whose
purple pall
His glances
in their
silvery
radiance
play?
The shy
dove
spreads its
wings and
flies abroad
across the
rolling
billows of
the sullen
flood,
bringing
the
covenant
o'er the
waters
grey:
in anguish

God is
throned, is
throned in
desolation,
in Him love
turns to
anguish,
and
anguish is
love's
motion,
a covenant
between
Time and
Time in
earth's
duress,
a covenant
between
loneliness
and
loneliness—
the anguish
God sent
down with
deepest
love was
fraught,
and God's
own
anguish
changed
His being
into
Thought.

CHAPTER LXXXIV

The Bible readings were now badly attended. The urgency of external events drew men's attention away from what was happening in their own souls, and that applied especially to strangers, who lent a ready ear to every rumour that conveyed the possibility of their imminent return home. The townsmen were more constant; the Bible class had already become for them a part of the established order which they wished to preserve independently of war or peace, and in some corner of himself each of them was secretly disturbed rather than pleased by the rumours of peace.

Fendrich and Samwald were natives of the town and were amongst the most faithful. Huguenau, indeed, asserted that Fendrich only came because Frau Esch had always milk in the house; he even went so far as to complain that he was skimped of his breakfast coffee because Frau Esch wanted to save the milk for the pious Fendrich. And he said this not only behind her back; but Frau Esch laughed at him: "Fancy being so jealous as that, Herr Huguenau," and Huguenau retorted: "You just look out, Mother Esch, or your husband's canting crew will eat you out of house and home." Huguenau's reproaches, however, were unjust; Fendrich would have come even without the milk-coffee.

In any case there they were again in the kitchen, both Samwald and Fendrich. Huguenau, who had just made ready to go out, stuck his nose in at the door: "Having a good guzzle?" Frau Esch answered for them: "Oh, I haven't a thing in the house." Huguenau eyed them both to see if they were chewing, and glanced at the table, but on assuring himself that there was no food set out he was quite satisfied. "Then I can leave you with a good conscience," he said, "you're in the best of company, Mother Esch." Yet he did not go; he was anxious to find out what she was saying to them. But they were all silent, so he began to talk himself: "Where's your friend to-day, Herr Samwald? the one with the sticks?" Samwald indicated the window which was rattling in the wind: "When the weather's bad he has aches and pains … he feels it beforehand." "Oh, la la," said Huguenau, "rheumatism; yes, that's a trial." Samwald shook his head: "No, he feels changes beforehand … he knows lots of things beforehand." Huguenau was only half listening: "Of course, it might be gout." Fendrich shivered a little: "I can feel it too in all my bones … in our factory there are more than twenty down with 'flu … old Petri's daughter died yesterday … there have been some deaths in the

hospital, too. Esch say it's the plague … the lung plague." Huguenau was disgusted: "He should be more careful with his defeatist arguments.… Plague! That would be a fine thing, indeed." Samwald said: "As for Gödicke, even the plague couldn't touch him … he has been raised from the dead." Fendrich had still more to add on the subject: "According to the Bible all the plagues of the Apocalypse are bound to come now … the Major prophesied that too … so did Esch." "Merde, I've had enough of this," said Huguenau, "I wish you a very merry meeting. Salut."

On the stairway he met Esch: "Two of your jolly companions are sitting waiting for you up there … if the whole town starts babbling of the plague it'll be your fault … you and your canting crew will send the whole world crazy, you're just making people besotted." Esch showed his strong teeth and waved his hand airily, which provoked Huguenau: "There's nothing to grin at, Sir Reverend." To his surprise Esch became serious at once: "You're right, this is no time for laughing … the two up there are quite right." Huguenau felt uncomfortable: "How are they right? … about the plague, for instance?" Esch said quietly: "Yes, and it would be better for you, yes, for you, my dear sir, if you were to realize at last that we're in the midst of fear and tribulation.…" "I'd like to know what good that could do me," said Huguenau, and began to continue his way downstairs. Esch had his schoolmastering voice: "I could soon enlighten you on that, but you don't want to find out … you're afraid to find out.…" Huguenau turned round. Esch was standing two steps above him and looked hugely powerful; it was annoying to have to look up at him like that, and Huguenau hopped up a step again. Suspicion was awakening in him again. What was it that Esch was keeping to himself? What could he know? But when Esch went on: "Only he who is in tribulation will partake of grace …" Huguenau stopped him: "Here, I want to listen to no more of that.…" Again Esch displayed his abominable sarcastic grin: "Didn't I tell you? it doesn't suit your new change of front … in fact, it has never suited you."

And he turned to continue his ascent.

There was a lightning flash behind Huguenau's eyeglasses:

"One moment, Herr Esch.…"

Esch paused.

"Yes, Herr Esch, I've something to say to you … of course that drivel doesn't suit me … grin if you like, it never has suited me.…I've always been a Freethinker and never made any secret of it.… I've never interfered with your canting piety, so you'll kindly leave me to find happiness in my own fashion … you can call it a new change of front for all I care, and you can come nosing behind me too if you like, as you've evidently been doing, and I'm no demagogue either like you, and I don't make people into besotted fools as you do, I'm not ambitious, but when I hear what's being said, not by your hypocrites upstairs, of course not, but by other people, then I think it's likely that things will take a very different turn from what you expect, Herr Reverend.… I mean, you're going to see strange things, and you'll see some people strung up on lamp-posts too … if the Major hadn't taken it into his head to be angry with me I would give him a friendly warning, I'm a decent chap, I am … he's got his back up against you, too, the doddering old fool, but all the same I'm giving you the chance of passing on the warning. You see, I play with all my cards on the table: I don't stab people in the back like some others I know."

And with that he turned at last to go and tramped whistling down the stairs. Afterwards he was annoyed with himself for having been so good-natured—there was no reason why he should feel that he owed anything to the Herren Pasenow and Esch—why on earth had he warned them, and of what?

Esch stood still for a moment. He felt for some reason struck to the heart. Then he said to himself: "A man who sacrifices himself must be a decent chap." And although one couldn't put it past Huguenau to commit any abomination, yet so long as he blustered so much it was all right: dogs that bark don't bite. Let him jaw in the public-houses as much as he liked, it wouldn't hurt anybody, least of all the Major. Esch smiled, he stood firm and strong on his feet, and then he stretched his arms like one who awakes from sleep or is nailed on a cross. He felt strong, firm and robust, and as if it were an entry settling the world's account he repeated: "A man who sacrifices himself must be a decent chap," then he pushed open the door of the kitchen.

CHAPTER LXXXV

"No one can see another in the darkness."

Events of 3rd, 4th and 5th November 1918.

What Huguenau had prophesied actually came to pass: one did see strange things, and these strange things took place on the 3rd and 4th of November.

On the morning of the 2nd of November a small demonstration was made by the workers from the paper factory. It proceeded, as such processions always do, towards the Town Hall, but this time, really for no

particular reason, the windows were smashed in. The Major called out the half-company which still remained at his disposal, and the demonstrators dispersed. Nevertheless the ensuing calm was only on the surface. The town was filled with rumours; the collapse of the German front was known, but nobody could ascertain if there were any negotiations for an armistice, and terrible things hung in the air.

So the day passed. In the evening a red glare could be seen in the west and it was said that all Trier was in flames. Huguenau, who regretted now that he had not long since sold the paper to the communists, resolved to run off a special edition, but his two workers were nowhere to be found. During the night there was firing in the neighbourhood of the prison. The rumour went that it had been a signal inciting the prisoners to a revolt. Later the information was divulged that a prison warder had let off several alarm shots on account of a misunderstanding; but nobody believed it.

Meantime morning had come, cold, foggy and winter-like. Already by seven the town council had assembled in the unheated, faintly lit, panelled council-chamber; the arming of respectable citizens was universally demanded—but on the objection, which became stronger and stronger, that this might be interpreted as a provocative step against the workers, the formation of a Civil Guard which should include workers and middle class alike was decided upon. There arose certain difficulties with the Town Commandant regarding the giving out of rifles from the stock in the munition stores, but finally—almost over the Major's head—the arms were requisitioned. Naturally there was no time left for a systematic levy, and so a committee under the chairmanship of the Burgomaster was chosen, which was to be responsible for the distribution of arms. That morning rifles were already being given out to all those who could prove that they were citizens of the town and could use a gun, and as things had reached that stage the Town Commandant could no longer refuse the collaboration of the military with the Civil Guard; the allocation of posts was already being made from the Commandant's office.

Esch and Huguenau had reported as a matter of course. Esch, resolved above all to remain near the Major, asked urgently to be employed within the town. He was put on night service, while Huguenau had to stand guard on the bridge during the afternoon.

Huguenau sat on the stone parapet of the bridge and shivered in the November fog. His rifle with its bayonet fixed leant beside him. Grass grew between the stone blocks of the parapet, and Huguenau occupied himself in plucking it out. One could also unloosen ancient pieces of mortar from between the stones and then let them drop into the water. He was intensely bored and found the whole affair stupid. The upturned collar of his recently purchased overcoat chafed roughly against his neck and chin and gave no warmth. Out of pure boredom he satisfied the calls of nature, but that also was presently over, and he merely sat there again. It was stupid to sit there with the silly green band on one's sleeve, and cold besides. And he considered whether he should not step over to the brothel—for the Major's order closing it had not had the slightest effect; it now ran a secret trade.

He was just picturing to himself that the old dame in the brothel must have put on the fires by this time and that it would be beautifully warm in there, when Marguerite appeared before him. Huguenau was glad to see her:

"Tiens," he said, "what are you doing here.… I thought you had run away … what have you done with the mark I gave you?"

Marguerite did not reply.

Huguenau felt he would be happier in the brothel:

"You're no use to me … you're not fourteen yet … see that you get safely home."

Nevertheless he took her on his knee; it was warmer. After a while he asked: "Have you got on your warm knickers?" When she said yes he felt reassured. They snuggled closely to each other. The Town Hall clock rang through the fog; five o'clock, and how dark it was already.

"Short days," said Huguenau, "another year going past already."

A second clock followed with four and then five strokes. Huguenau grew more and more melancholy. What was the use of all this? what was he doing here? over there across the fields lay Esch's place, and Huguenau spat in a wide arc in its direction. But then a sudden fear clutched him; he had left the door of the printing-shed wide open, and if there should be any looting that day they would smash his machine to pieces.

"Get down," he said roughly to Marguerite, and when she hesitated he boxed her ears. Hastily he searched his pockets for the printing-shed key. Should he himself return or should he send Marguerite with the key to Frau Esch?

He was almost on the point of deserting his post and betaking himself home when he shrank back, for now there came a real terror that pierced him to the marrow; on the edge of the forest there was a dazzling flash, followed the next moment by a frightful detonation. He was just able to realize that it came from the

barracks of the trench mortar company where some fool must have exploded what remained of the ammunition, but he at once instinctively flung himself down and was wise enough to remain lying on the ground to await further explosions. Right enough, two more violent detonations followed at short intervals and then the din subsided into a sporadic crackle.

Huguenau peered cautiously over the stone parapet and saw the walls of the munition-sheds red and smouldering with the fire inside, and the roof of the barracks burning. “So it’s begun,” he told himself, stood up, and removed the dirt from his new winter overcoat. Then he looked round for Marguerite and whistled for her several times, but she had run away—home, he hoped. He had little time to deliberate, for already a crowd of men were coming running down towards him from the barracks with sticks, stones and some even with rifles in their hands. And to Huguenau’s astonishment Marguerite was running along beside them.

Their objective was the jail, that was clear. Huguenau grasped that in an instant, and he felt like a chief of staff whose commands were being exactly carried out to the minute. “Fine fellows,” said something within him, and he found it the most natural thing in the world that he should join them.

They reached the prison at the double, shouting and yelling. The gate was shut. A hail of stones rattled against it and then a direct attack was attempted. With the butt end of his rifle Huguenau crashed the first blow against the oaken panels. Someone had got hold of a crowbar, they had not to employ it very long, a breach was soon made, the door sprang open and the crowd surged into the courtyard. It was deserted, the staff had hidden themselves somewhere; well, they would soon be smoked out, these fellows—but from the cells rang a wild chorus: “Hurrah for freedom! Hurrah for freedom! Hip, hip, hooray!”

When the first detonation came Esch was sitting in the kitchen. With one bound he was at the window, but started back when at the second explosion the loosened window together with the window frame flew at his head. Was it an air raid? His wife crouched on her knees among the splintered glass and babbled a Paternoster. For one second he gaped at her in open-mouthed amazement; all her life she had not prayed! then he jerked her to her feet. “Into the cellar, air raid.” Meanwhile from the top of the stairs he saw the munition store in flames, and heard the crackle of explosions coming from it. So it had begun. And his next thought was: “The Major!” To push his whimpering wife back into the room—her lamenting voice imploring him not to leave her still rang in his ears—to seize his rifle and rush downstairs was the work of a moment. The street was full of yelling people. From the market-place came a trumpet call. Esch panted up the street. Behind him a pair of harnessed horses were being led forward at a trot; he knew that they were intended for the fire brigade and it did him good to think that a remnant of order still remained intact. The fire-engine was already standing in the market-place, it had been drawn out, but the crew had not yet arrived in full force. The bugler climbed on to the driver’s seat and blew the summons again and again, but as yet only six men had turned up. From the other side of the market-place a troop of soldiers came running and the captain was sensible enough to put them at the disposal of the fire brigade; the fire-engine rolled away with a full complement.

In the Town Hall all the doors were open. Nobody to be found: the Commandant’s headquarters empty. That was a relief to Esch; for at least they would not find the old man here if they came. But where was he? When Esch came out again he at last caught sight of a soldier and shouted at him asking whether he had seen the Commandant. Yes, the Commandant had called out the Civil Guard and was either at the barracks or the prison … which apparently had been stormed. To the prison, then! Esch broke into an awkward, heavy trot.

While the crowd pushed their way into the prison buildings Huguenau had remained standing in the courtyard. It had been a success, without doubt it was a success—Huguenau made the sarcastic grimace that he could now manage quite well. The Major would get a nice surprise if he were to see him here, and Esch ditto. No doubt about it, it was a brilliantly triumphal success! nevertheless Huguenau felt uncomfortable—what next? he regarded the courtyard, the burning barracks gave a splendid light, but it was nothing so extraordinary after all, the courtyard looked just as he had always expected it to look. And he had had enough of this crowd too.

Suddenly he heard piercing screams. They had hunted out a warder and were dragging him out into the courtyard. When Huguenau came up the man was lying as though crucified on the ground, except that one rigid leg jerked convulsively and rhythmically in the air. Two women had thrown themselves upon him, and the man with the crowbar was standing with hobnailed boots on one of the poor wretch’s hands and bringing the iron bar down with a thud on his tortured limbs. Huguenau felt that he was about to vomit. With panic in his belly and heart he shouldered his rifle and ran back to the town.

The town lay sharply outlined with its pointed gables in the glare of the burning barracks, the black

contours of the houses surmounted by the towers of the Town Hall and the churches. From these the clocks struck the half-hour serenely, as though a still deeper peace hovered over this human community. And the familiar strokes of the bells, the familiar sight of the houses, all the peace that was still there while round about everything was burning, turned Huguenau's choking fear into a wild longing for human proximity. He ran straight across the fields, sometimes stopping to recover his breath. Then he caught a smell of cooked meat and once more the thought transfixed him that the door of the printing-shed was not locked, that the burglars and housebreakers would be streaming out of the prison now, and with redoubled fear, with redoubled resolution, he struggled on towards home.

Hanna Wendling was lying in bed with a high fever. At first Dr Kessel had tried to lay the blame for it on her keeping her bedroom window open every night; but later he had had to admit that it was Spanish influenza.

When the explosion took place and the window panes came crashing into the room Hanna was not in the least surprised: it was not she who was responsible for the closing of the windows, it had been forced upon her, and as Heinrich had neglected to have bars put on them, of course the burglars would climb in now. Almost with satisfaction she mentally noted: "The invasion from below," and waited for what would follow next. But when a more deafening crash ensued she came to her senses and jumped out of bed with the sudden knowledge that she must go to her son.

She held fast to the bed-post and tried to marshal her thoughts; the boy was in the kitchen, yes, now she remembered that she had sent him downstairs to be out of the reach of infection. She must go down to him.

A strong draught blew through the room, blew through the whole house. All the windows and doors were driven out of their frames and on the first floor the panes of the whole glass frontage had been burst in, for at this high-lying part of the valley the air-pressure was particularly violent. The next detonation swept half of the tiled roof off with a great clatter. If the house had not been centrally heated a conflagration would have been unavoidable. Hanna, however, did not feel the cold, she scarcely noticed even the clattering din, she did not understand what had happened, nor did she try in the least to understand: passing the screaming housemaid, whom she met in the dressing-room, she hastened to the kitchen.

In the kitchen it struck her that she must have been cold before, for here it was cosy. The windows down here had not suffered. The cook was crouching in a corner with the sobbing trembling child on her lap. The cat was lying peacefully in front of the stove. Also the curious smell of burning fireworks had vanished; this place smelt clean and warm. One had the feeling of having been rescued. Then she discovered that with incomprehensible presence of mind she had brought her bed-quilt with her. She wrapped herself in the quilt and sat down in the corner farthest from her son; she must take care that he did not catch the influenza from her, and she waved him away when he made to go over to her. The housemaid had followed her, and now the gardener and his wife arrived too: "The barracks are on fire … look there." The gardener pointed towards the window, but the women did not dare to go across to it, but remained sitting where they were. Hanna felt perfectly clear in the head. She said: "We must wait for it to end," and wrapped herself more firmly in her quilt. Suddenly for some reason the electric light went out. The housemaid screamed again, Hanna repeated in the darkness: "We must wait for it to end," and then she fell again into a vague doze. The boy had fallen asleep in the cook's arms. The housemaid and the gardener's wife sat on the coal bunker, the gardener leaned against the fireplace. The windows still rattled, and from time to time another row of tiles fell from the roof. They sat in darkness, they all gazed at the lighted windows, they gazed without moving, and they grew more and more motionless.

Esch hastened along the road that led downwards to the prison—his rifle had slid down from his shoulder, and he held it in his hands like a charging soldier. About half-way to the prison he heard the shouting of an approaching crowd. He flung himself into the bushes until they should have gone past. There were some two hundred men, a very mixed rabble, convicts among them, recognizable by their grey uniforms. Some of them were trying to sing the *Marseillaise*, others the *Internationale.* A man with a sergeant's voice kept shouting perpetually: "Form fours," but nobody paid any attention. At the head of the procession, above the heads of the marchers, swayed a puppet; it was the stuffed uniform of a prison warder hung from a cross-bar, from a sort of gallows—apparently they had stripped someone naked for this purpose; to the puppet's chest a white placard was fastened, and in the flickering light of the burning depot Esch could make out the words "Town Commandant." They actually had a child with them, perched on one of the men's shoulders, a little girl who reminded one somewhat of Marguerite, but Esch had no time to think of such things; he waited until the procession passed and then, to avoid any stragglers, he kept to the fields adjoining the road and ran on.

The lights of a motor-car suddenly appeared in front of him. Esch's blood ran cold—it could only be the

Major! the Major, blindly rushing into the arms of the rebels. He must be stopped! stopped at any cost! Esch slithered down the bank and stationed himself in the middle of the road, waving his arms and shouting at the top of his voice. But the occupants of the car did not notice him or did not want to notice him, and if he had not leapt to the side he would have been run over. He had just time to make sure that it was actually the Major's car, and that besides the Major three soldiers were in it, one of them standing on the footboard. He stared helplessly after the car, then he ran for all he was worth behind it, he ran in terrible fear, expecting every moment to see something dreadful happening. And already in front of him there were several reports; they were followed by a crashing blow somewhat like an explosion, then came shouts and a general hubbub. Esch rushed up the bank again.

The crowd was standing beside the first houses of the town; the neighbourhood was still lighted up by the fire. Taking cover behind the bushes Esch reached the first garden fence and creeping behind it could now draw near. The car had fallen on its side and lay burning on the opposite bank of the road. From all appearances the driver had lost control over the car and run into the bank when he saw the crowd, or he may have been hit by a stone. Half-doubled up in front of a tree on which he had split his skull, he was still groaning, while one of the soldiers lay outstretched on the road. Another, a sergeant, who appeared to have escaped with a whole skin, was surrounded by the raving mob. Under the fists and cudgels of the rioters he was making feeble and imploring gestures, saying something which could not be heard amid the noise: then he too sank down. Esch considered whether he should open fire on the crowd, but at that moment a blue flame burst from the bonnet of the car and someone shouted: "The car is exploding!" The crowd retreated, became silent and waited for the explosion. But when nothing happened, and the car merely went on quietly burning, cries arose of "To the Commandant's quarters!" "To the Town Hall," and the mob rolled on again towards the town.

But where was the Major? Suddenly Esch knew; he was beneath the car and in danger of being burned alive. Goaded by fear Esch clambered over the wooden fence, rushed up to the car, and tugged at the wreckage; a dry sobbing overcame him when he saw clearly that he would not be able to lift it by himself. He stood in despair in front of the burning car, and burned his helpless hands with fresh attempts. Then a man came up. It was the third soldier and he was unhurt, for he had been flung right over the road bank and fallen in a field. Together they managed to raise one side of the car. Esch crawled underneath, supporting the body of the car on his back, and the soldier pulled out the Major. Thank God! But still they were not out of the wood, they must get out of reach of the perilously burning car as quickly as possible, and so they carried the unconscious Major up the bank and laid him down behind a few bushes on the grass.

Esch knelt down beside the Major and gazed into his face; it was a peaceful face, and his breathing was regular, though feeble. His heart also was beating quietly and rhythmically—Esch had torn open the Major's overcoat and tunic—and with the exception of a few burns and abrasions no external wound was to be found. The soldier stood by: "There's the others too.…" Esch straightened himself with difficulty. All at once he felt that he could hardly drag even himself along, nevertheless he pulled himself together once more, and they carried the wounded sergeant also to safety. The bodies of the dead soldier and the dead chauffeur they laid at the side of the road.

When it was finished Esch flung himself down on the grass beside the Major: "Must take a breath for a minute.… I'm done in." He was so exhausted that when flames suddenly flared over the roofs of the town and the soldier shouted: "The fools have set fire to the Town Hall!" he scarcely paid any attention.

In the hospital there had been chaos and confusion.

At first everybody had rushed into the garden without regard to the patients who were unable to move; nobody listened to their lamentations.

Kühlenbeck had had to exert all his authority to restore order again. He had single-handed shifted the gravest cases to the basement; he carried the patients like children in his arms, his voice boomed through the corridors, and he cursed at everybody like a bargee, including even Flurschütz and Sister Mathilde, if his commands were not executed on the spot. Sister Carla had disappeared and could not be found.

Finally things began to look ship-shape again. The beds were carried down from the devastated upper floor, and by twos and threes the patients reappeared. Some were missing. They were in the garden, or perhaps had strayed still farther, into the woods or somewhere.

Flurschütz and an attendant set out to look for them. One of the first that they discovered outside the garden was Gödicke; he had not got very far and was standing on the hillside, which he had chosen as a coign of vantage, his two sticks uplifted towards the heavens.

One would have thought that he was exulting.

And in fact when they came nearer they heard him laughing with that barking, animal laughter for which

all the inmates had been waiting for months.

He paid no attention to the two of them when they shouted to him, and when they came nearer and made as though to lead him back he shook his sticks threateningly.

Flurschütz felt somewhat at a loss:

"But, Gödicke, do come along.…"

Gödicke pointed with his sticks at the flames and bawled in delight:

"The Judgment Day … arisen from the dead … arisen from the dead … you must go to hell if you don't rise from the dead … the devil will get you all … he'll get you all now.…"

What was to be done with the man! But after they had stared at him for a while the attendant found the right words:

"Ludwig, it's the dinner-hour, come down from the scaffolding."

Gödicke fell silent; he gazed suspiciously at them out of his bearded face, but finally he hobbled after them.

Breathless and trembling Huguenau crossed the garden and reached the printing-shed. For a moment he did not know what had led him there. Then he remembered. The printing-press!

He entered. The dark room was fitfully illumined from outside and lay in Sabbath-like order and neatness. Huguenau, his rifle between his knees, sat down in front of the press. He felt disappointed; the machine did not repay his exertions; cold and impassive it stood there and merely threw restless shadows which made him feel uncomfortable. If the convict rabble came it would serve the bloody machine jolly well right if they smashed it to pieces. Although it was a beautiful little machine … he laid his hands on it and was angry because the iron felt so cold. Merde, why should he get angry about that? Huguenau shrugged his shoulders, gazed out into the courtyard, across at the barn where the Sunday meetings were held. Would Esch be preaching there again next Sunday? Haïssez les ennemis de la sainte religion. Pious hypocrites. An empty barn, that was all their stock in trade … what had a man like that to lose! A man like that should have his bones broken for him. He had no worries … preached on Sunday, and now he was sitting upstairs with his wife and they were comforting each other, while a fellow had to sit down here beside this bloody machine.

Once more he forgot why he had come. He leant his rifle against the printing-press. Standing in the courtyard he sniffed: again a smell of meat cooking was wafted to him. To-night of course there would be no supper, but upstairs they would be having something all right—she would see that Esch didn't want.

When he reached the landing above he started back, for the door of his room was lifted out of its hinges. That wasn't as it should be. The door was jammed too, only with a great effort was he able to push it open, and inside in his room things looked still more desolate: the mirror no longer hung above the washing-table, but lay on the top of the broken crockery. A wilderness. Incomprehensible and disturbing, it reminded one of splintered bones. Huguenau sat down on the sofa, he wanted to realize what had happened but he did not want to think … someone should come to explain it all to him and comfort him … stroke his hair.

Then it occurred to him that he must summon Frau Esch in any case to show her the damage … otherwise she would finish by holding him responsible for it … he had no intention of paying for damage that he had not caused. But just as he was about to call to her she rushed into his room, having heard his footsteps: "Where is my man?"

A spacious, blissful and deeply moving sense of comfort descended on Huguenau at the sight of a familiar face. He smiled to her frankly and cordially: "Mother Esch …" he literally beamed upon her … now all will be well, she'll put me to bed.… Meanwhile she did not seem even to see him: "Where is my man?" The stupid question disturbed him—what did the woman want Esch for now? if he wasn't there, it was surely all the better … he replied roughly: "How should I know where he's loafing about? He'll come back for his supper all right."

Perhaps she had not even listened, for she stepped up to him, seized him by the shoulders, and almost screamed at him:

"He's gone, he's gone with his rifle.… I've heard firing."

A hope rose in Huguenau: Esch was shot! but why in that case did the woman have such a lamenting voice? why did she have the wrong reaction? He wanted her to comfort him, and instead of that he must keep her here and comfort her, and all on account of Esch too! She was still beseeching him: "Where is he?" and she was still clutching him by the shoulder. Both embarrassed and furious he stroked her thick arm as if she were a weeping child, he would even have gladly shown her some kindness, he ran his hand up and down her arm, but his mouth spoke unkind words: "What are you snivelling about Esch for? haven't we all had enough of the schoolmaster?… after all, you've got me …" and only while he was saying this did he

himself become aware that he was making a more brutal demand on her … as a sort of substitute for what she had failed to give him. Now she too guessed what he was after: “Herr Huguenau, for God’s sake, Herr Huguenau.…” And already almost bereft of will-power, she made scarcely any further resistance to his panting urgency. Like a criminal trying to save the hangman trouble she undid her underclothes, and without even a kiss he fell with her on the sofa.

Afterwards her first words were: “Save my man!” Huguenau felt indifferent about that; Esch could live now as long as he liked. But the next moment she broke out into shrill screams: the window was suddenly illumined a blood red, orange-yellow flames shot up, the Town Hall was burning. She sank to the floor, a shapeless lump … she, she was to blame for everything: “Jesus Maria, what have I done, what have I done …” she crept over to him, “… save him, save him.…” Huguenau had stepped to the window. He felt annoyed; now trouble was beginning here too. He had had enough of it out there already, more than enough. And what did this woman want from him? it was Esch that was finally responsible … he could burn out there with the Major if he liked, holy men had always been burned. And now there would be looting on the top of everything else … and he had forgotten again to lock up the printing-shed … he took the opportunity of escaping with credit: “I’ll look after him.” If he should meet Esch now, he reflected as he went out, he would fling him down the stairs.

But in the printing-shed everything was neat and orderly as before. His rifle leant there and the machine threw its restless shadows. Red, black, yellow and orange-coloured, the sheaves of fire from the Town Hall shot up into the sky, while the barracks and the munition depot on the other side were still smouldering, a dirty brown. The bare branches of the fruit-trees were stiffly outlined. Huguenau contemplated the spectacle and found all at once that it was as it should be … everything was as it should be, and the printing-machine too pleased him once more … everything was as it should be, everything had been put right, he had been given back his customary nature and his clear common sense … now all that was needed was to put the final touch to the business and all would be well!

He softly climbed the stairs again, peeped cautiously into the devastated kitchen, stole over to the bread cupboard and cut himself a good slice, and as he could find nothing more returned to the printing-shed, settled himself comfortably, took the rifle between his outstretched legs, and began slowly to eat … one would manage somehow or other to settle the looters too.

Esch and the soldier knelt beside the Major. They were trying to bring him back to consciousness and rubbing his chest and hands with the damp grass. When at last he opened his eyes, they moved his arms and legs up and down, and it proved that nothing was broken. But he responded to none of their appeals, he remained lying outstretched on his back, and only his hands had grown restless, clutching at the damp earth, burrowing in the earth, seeking for clods and crumbling them to pieces.

It was clear that they must get him away as quickly as possible. To summon help from the town was out of the question; so they would have to manage by themselves. The wounded sergeant had meantime gathered his strength sufficiently to sit up—one could therefore leave him by himself for a little, and they decided first of all to carry the Major across the fields to Esch’s house; it would have been too risky to take him by the main road.

As they were debating over the best way to set about it, the Major made signs as though he wished to speak: clutching a fragment of earth in his fingers he raised his hand, and his lips opened and pushed themselves forward, but his hand fell again and again to the ground and no sound could be caught. Esch put his ear quite close to the Major’s mouth and waited: at last he made out the words: “Fell with my horse … an easy obstacle, fell all the same … the right foreleg broken.… I’ll shoot him myself … wipe out dishonour with a bullet …” and then more distinctly and as though he were seeking for assent: “… with a bullet, not with unchivalrous weapons.…” “What did he say?” asked the soldier. Esch replied softly: “He thinks that he’s fallen from his horse … but now we must go … if only it wasn’t so damned light … we’ll better take our rifles with us in any case.”

The Major had closed his eyes again. They raised him cautiously, and every now and then resting and exchanging places, they carried him across the sodden rain-soaked fields, whose miry soil clung persistently and heavily to their shoes. The Major opened his eyes once, saw the conflagration in the town, and looking straight at Esch, commanded: “Gas bombs … go and put them out.” Then he sank back again into somnolence.

Arrived in his courtyard Esch dismissed the soldier; he was to go back at once to his comrades—Esch himself would follow later, he would easily find someone in the house to help him to carry the Major upstairs. So for the time being they laid him on the bench in front of the garden. But when the soldier was gone Esch went quietly into the house, leant his rifle against the wall and opened the trap-door to the cellar. Then he took the Major on his back and carried him in, cautiously feeling his way down the steps

leading into the cellar, and when he reached the bottom laid him on a heap of potatoes, which he first carefully covered with a woollen rug. Then he lighted the paraffin lamp fastened to the dingy wall and stopped up the chinks in the cellar with boards and rags, so that no ray of light might pierce through and be seen from outside. Finally he scribbled a note which he stuck into the Major's clasped hands: "Herr Major, you were knocked unconscious in an accident to the motor-car. I shall come back soon. Yours faithfully Esch." He examined the lamp once more to see whether there was enough oil in it; perhaps he would not be able to return for a long time. The ladder leading up to the cellar door had only three steps: before Esch opened it he turned round for a last time, regarded almost with misgiving the low-vaulted roof and the man lying motionlessly outstretched: but for the smell of paraffin one might have taken it for a tomb.

Slowly he climbed out. At the foot of the house stairs he listened for a little for any sound from above. Nothing moved—well, his wife would have calmed down by now … the wounded man outside the town was more important at present. He shouldered his rifle and stepped out into the street.

But his thoughts were with the man who lay in the cellar, the paraffin lamp at his head. When the light expires the Redeemer is near. The light must expire so that the debt of time might be paid.

Huguenau had just finished his slice of bread and was considering how he could get hold of further nourishment, when in the sharp light outside he caught sight of a figure in the garden. He seized his rifle, but recognized at the same moment that it was Esch himself, carrying a sort of sack on his shoulders. So the Herr Reverend had actually joined the looters! of course that wasn't surprising; well, he would soon make sure, and he waited curiously for Esch to come nearer with his burden. Esch's footsteps approached slowly and heavily through the courtyard; it was quite a long time before he was visible through the window. But then Huguenau became almost breathless with astonishment—Esch was carrying a man! Esch was carrying the Major out there! there was no possible mistake about it, it was the Major that Esch was carrying. Huguenau stole on tiptoe to the door and stuck out his head through the opening—no doubt about it, it was the Major—and he saw Esch disappearing with his burden through the cellar door.

Huguenau was intensely excited while he waited to see how things would develop further. And when Esch once more appeared and stepped out into the street, Huguenau too shouldered his rifle and followed at a safe distance.

The streets running in the direction of the Town Hall were fully illumined by the glare, but in the side-streets the houses threw sharp flickering shadows. Not a human being was to be seen. Everybody had rushed to the market-place, from which came a vague sound of tumult. Huguenau could not help thinking that in these deserted streets anyone could loot to his heart's delight; and if he himself were to force his way into some house now and carry out whatever he liked, no one would seek to prevent him—though of course what was there of any value that one could lift from such hovels, and the phrase "better game" came into his mind. Esch turned round the next corner; so he wasn't going to the Town Hall, the sanctimonious villain. Two youths ran past; Huguenau clutched his rifle in his hands, ready to strike. From a side-street a man leading a bicycle reeled towards him; he held the handle-bar convulsively with his left hand, the right arm dangled by his side as though broken; Huguenau gazed with horror into a smashed and battered face, from which one of the eyes still stared unseeingly into vacancy. Caring for nothing save to keep hold of his bicycle, as though he were resolved to take it with him into the next world, the stricken man reeled past. Face bashed in with a rifle butt, Huguenau told himself, and he clutched his rifle more firmly. A dog detached itself from a house door, ran sniffing behind the wounded man and licked the drops of blood as they fell. Esch was no longer to be seen. Huguenau quickened his steps. At the next street-crossing he caught again the glint of Esch's fixed bayonet. He followed more quickly. Esch marched straight on, looking neither to the right nor the left; even the burning Town Hall did not seem to arouse his interest. Now his footsteps echoed no longer on the uneven pavement, for it came to a stop out here, and presently he turned into a narrow lane which ran along the town walls. Huguenau began to walk fast; he was now some twenty paces behind Esch, who calmly continued on his way: should he knock him over the head with the rifle butt? no, that would only be silly, what was needed was something that would end the business for good. And then it overwhelmed him like an illumination—he lowered his rifle, reached Esch with a few feline tango-like leaps, and ran the bayonet into his angular back. To the murderer's great astonishment Esch went on calmly for a few steps more, then he fell forward on his face without a sound.

Huguenau stood beside the fallen man. His foot touched Esch's hand, which lay across a wheel-track in the sticky mire. Should he stamp on it? no doubt about it, the man was dead. Huguenau felt grateful to him —all was well now! he crouched down and looked into the sidewards-turned face with its unshaven stubble of hair. When he failed to find in it the jeering expression that he feared he was satisfied and clapped the dead man benevolently, almost tenderly, on the shoulder.

All was well.

He exchanged the rifles, leaving his own bloodstained one with the dead man, assuredly a superfluous piece of caution on such a day, but he liked to do everything methodically and in order. And after that he set out on his return journey. The town wall was brilliantly lighted up by the burning buildings, the shadows of the trees were outlined on it, a last orange-yellow shower of sparks shot up from the roof—Huguenau could not help remembering the man in the picture in Colmar soaring up into the opening heaven, and would have liked to shake him by the uplifted right hand, so light and happy did he feel—then the Town Hall tower crashed in and the conflagration ebbed to a brownish smoky red.

"Rose Cottage," half-wrecked, still lay dark and silent in the night breeze which blew up there.

In the kitchen nothing had changed. In rigid immobility the six people still sat petrified in their places, still sat there motionless, more motionless perhaps even than before, as if bound and fettered in the stretched wires of expectation. They neither slept nor watched, nor did they know how long this state had already lasted. Only the child slept. The quilt had slipped from Hanna's shoulder, but she did not feel cold. Once she said into the silence: "We must wait for it to end," but the others probably did not even hear. And yet they listened, listened into vacancy, listened for the voices which came to them from outside. And though in Hanna's ear the words "The invasion from below" kept perpetually repeating themselves, and though she could no longer attach any meaning to them, meaningless words, meaningless sounds, yet she listened to see whether it was not these meaningless words that people were shouting outside there. The water-tap dripped monotonously. None of the six moved. Perhaps the others also heard the words she was listening to, for in spite of the wide social differences between them, in spite of their isolation and estrangement, they had all become a unified whole; a magic ring was cast round them, a chain whose links were themselves and which could not be broken through without grave injury. And in this enchantment, in this collective state of trance, it is comprehensible enough that for Hanna the cry of invasion should become more and more distinct, more distinct than she could ever have apprehended it with her physical hearing; the cry came to her as though winged by the power of their collective listening, it was borne on the current of that power, which was nevertheless a powerless power, power merely to accept and to hear, and the cry was very loud, the voice grew mightier and mightier and was like a rushing wind sweeping through the world. The dog whined in the garden and several times started barking. Then the dog too fell silent, and she heard nothing more save the voice. And at the voice's command she stood up; the others did not seem to notice it, not even when she opened the door and left the room; she went in her bare feet, but she did not know it. Her bare soles went over a stretch of concrete, that was the passage, they went up five stone steps, went over linoleum, that was the office, went over parquet-flooring and carpeting, that was the hall, went over very dry coconut-matting, over splintered tiles, over the paving of a garden-path. In such an undeviating advance as this, which may almost be called a march, only the footsoles know the way, for the eyes see only the goal—and as she stepped out of the door she saw it, she saw the goal! at the end of the endlessly stretching paved path, stretching like a long bridge, there, with one leg swung over the garden fence, was the invader, the housebreaker, there, clambering over the parapet of the bridge—a man in grey convict's clothes; like a grey block of stone he clung there. And did not move. With her hands outstretched before her she stepped on to the bridge, she let the quilt fall, her nightgown billowed in the wind, and thus she strode towards the motionless man. But whether it was that the others in the kitchen had after all noticed her leaving, or that they were drawn in a magical chain after her, the gardener appeared, followed by the housemaid, followed by the cook, followed by the gardener's wife, and, though in faint and subdued voices, they called now to their mistress.

It was no doubt the weirdness of this procession led by the white lady with the ghostly robes that made the hair bristle on the housebreaker's head and paralysed him so completely that he was scarcely capable of swinging his leg back over the fence again. And when he had done so he gaped for a while longer at the spectral apparition, and then he ran from the place and vanished in the darkness.

Meanwhile Hanna went on her way, and when she reached the fence she stuck her hand through the railings as through the bars of a window, and seemed to be waving good-bye to someone. From the town came the glare of the conflagration, but the explosions had ceased and the spell was broken. And even the wind had fallen. She sank to sleep against the bars of the fence and was carried back into the house by the gardener and the cook, where they prepared a bed for her in the storeroom next to the kitchen.

(There next day Hanna Wendling succumbed to a severe attack of influenza complicated by pneumonia.)

Huguenau marched back. Before a house a sobbing child was standing, it was certainly not more than three at most. Where could Marguerite be hiding? he wondered. He lifted up the child, pointed out to it the

beautiful fireworks sending their light over from the market-place; and he imitated the crackling and hissing of the flames and the crashing of the falling beams, his-s-ss whish-sh-sh-sh bang! until he made the child laugh. Then he carried it into the house and informed the mother that she shouldn't leave a small child out in the street in times such as these without someone to look after it.

When he reached the house he leant his rifle against the wall of the entrance hall just as Esch had done, then lifted the trap-door and climbed down to the Major.

Since Esch left the Major had not changed his position; he was still lying on the heap of potatoes, the note between his fingers; but his blue eyes were open and staring at the flame of the cellar lamp. Nor did he turn his eyes away from it when Huguenau entered. Huguenau cleared his throat, and when the Major gave no sign he felt offended. This wasn't a time to continue keeping up a childish quarrel. He pulled in the stool which Frau Esch used when she picked the potatoes, and with a polite bow seated himself opposite the Major:

"Herr Major, I can understand of course that you have reasons for not wanting to see me, but that's ancient history by now, and besides events have ended by justifying me, and I can't keep silent about the fact that you have seen me in a quite false light; don't forget, Herr Major, that I have been the victim of a miserable intrigue, one shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but only think of the contempt that that canting parson treated me with from the very beginning, Herr Major. And never a word of thanks! Has the Herr Major ever given me a word of recognition for all the functions I've arranged in honour of the Herr Major? no, never more than ' I thank you '—but for the rest: you keep your distance and I'll keep mine. But I don't want to be unjust, once you did give me your hand quite spontaneously, that time the Iron Bismarck was unveiled: you see, Herr Major, that I've cherished in my memory every act of kindness you've shown me, but even then the Herr Major's lips had an ironical expression on them. If you only knew how I hated it when Esch put on that expression. I was always shut out, if I may be permitted to say so. And why? simply because I didn't happen to belong to the town from the beginning … a foreigner, so to speak, an interloper, as Esch so kindly put it. That was no reason for jeering at me and slighting me; I had always to decrease, that was another of his expressions—I had always to decrease, so that our Reverend Parson might increase and cut a great figure before the Herr Major. I saw that all right, and I can assure Herr Major that that hurts a man's feelings; and the insinuations you used to throw out about 'evil,' all pointing at me, ah yes, I understood them quite well too, just try and remember, Herr Major, for a whole evening you talked about evil, no wonder if a man who gets such things said to him should end by becoming really evil. I admit too that the facts seemed to support it, and that the Herr Major would perhaps call me a blackmailer or a murderer to-day. And yet it's only a matter of appearance, in reality it's all quite different, only one can't express it exactly, so to speak; besides, it looks as though you haven't the slightest desire to know what it really is. Yes, Herr Major, you talked a great deal about love that evening too, and Esch has been drivelling about love ever since—his drivel always made me sick, in any case, but when one is continually talking about love one might at least try to understand a fellow-creature. Oh, Herr Major, I know of course that I can't ask for that, and that a man in Herr Major's position would never condescend to have such feelings for a man like me, after all nothing better than a common deserter, though I would like to be allowed to say that Esch wasn't such a great deal better than myself.… I don't know whether the Herr Major quite understands what I mean, but I beg the Herr Major to have patience.…"

Polishing his eyeglasses he gazed at the Major, from whom there still proceeded neither movement nor sound:

"I beg the Herr Major most urgently not to imagine that I am keeping him imprisoned in this cellar for the purpose of forcing him to listen to me; frightful things are happening out there in the town, and if the Herr Major were to go out the Herr Major would be strung up to a lamp-post. The Herr Major will be able to convince himself of that to-morrow with his own eyes; for God's sake, put some trust in me for once.…"

So Huguenau spoke on to the living and motionless puppet, until he saw at last that the Major did not hear him. But even then he did not want to believe it:

"I beg pardon, the Herr Major is exhausted and here I am talking. I'll fetch something to eat."

He hastily rushed upstairs. Frau Esch sat humped together on one of the kitchen chairs, sobbing to herself, her body shaking convulsively. When he entered she started up:

"Where is my man?"

"He's all right, he'll be here presently. Have you anything to eat? I need it for a wounded man."

"Is my man wounded?"

"No, I told you he'll be here presently. Give me something to eat. Could you make an omelette? No, that would take too long.…"

He went into the living-room; a plate with a slice of sausage stood on the table. Without asking he seized it and stuck it between two slices of bread. Frau Esch had followed him and in a voice shrill with anxiety

cried:

"Let that be, that belongs to my man."

Huguenau had the uncomfortable feeling that one dared take nothing belonging to the dead; perhaps too it would bring the Major ill luck if he ate the food of the dead. Besides, sausage wasn't the right sort of thing for him in any case. He reflected for a moment:

"Right, but surely you must have some milk … you always have milk in the house."

Yes, she had some milk. He filled a milk-jug and carried it carefully down to the cellar.

"Herr Major, here's milk, lovely rich new milk!" he cried in a brisk voice.

The Major did not move. Obviously milk wasn't the right thing either; Huguenau was annoyed at his mistake: perhaps I should have brought him wine instead? that would have roused and strengthened him … still he seems to be very feeble … well, now we'll try him with it all the same! And Huguenau bent down and lifted the old man's head, and the Major let him do it without making any resistance and even obediently opened his lips when Huguenau put the beak of the milk-jug to them. And when the Major accepted and swallowed the slowly trickling milk Huguenau felt happy. He ran upstairs to fetch a second jugful; at the door he glanced back, saw that the Major had turned his head to see where he was going, and nodding back kindly he waved a hand: "I'll be back at once." And when he descended once more the Major was still gazing at the cellar door and greeted him with a little smile, indeed it was more like a faint laugh. But he drank only a few drops more. Holding Huguenau by the finger he had fallen asleep.

With his finger in the Major's hand Huguenau sat on. He read the note which was still lying on the Major's breast and put this piece of evidence in his pocket. Of course he wouldn't need it, for if he found himself in a tight corner he would say in any case that the Major had been given into his keeping by Esch: all the same, best to make doubly sure. From time to time he tried cautiously to free his finger, but then the Major wakened, smiled vaguely and without releasing the finger fell asleep again. The stool was very hard and uncomfortable. Thus they passed the rest of the night.

Towards morning Huguenau managed to free himself. No joke to sit all night on a stool. He climbed out to the street. It was still dark. The town seemed to be quiet. He went across to the market-place. The Town Hall, gutted to the very ground, was smouldering and smoking. The military and the fire brigade had set sentries round it. Two houses in the market-place had also caught fire, and house furniture lay piled up in confusion in front of them. Now and then the hose was again set in action to damp down some new smouldering outbreak. Huguenau was struck by the fact that men in convict uniform were also helping to work the hose and eagerly taking part in the work of clearing up the mess. He spoke to a man who like himself was wearing a green armlet, and asked what had happened since last evening, for he himself had been occupied elsewhere. The man was glad to talk: the collapse of the Town Hall, he said, had really finished the whole business. After that they had all stood round the fire looking pretty foolish, friend and foe alike, and had their work cut out to save the neighbouring houses. A few ruffians, it was true, had tried to force their way into the houses, but when their own comrades heard the women screaming they had fallen on the looters. One or two of them had got their skulls caved in, and that was all to the good, for after that nobody had thought of looting any more. Just a few minutes ago the wounded had been taken over to the hospital—it was high time too, for their shrieks and groans were almost past endurance. Of course the authorities in Trier had been rung up straight away, but there was chaos and rioting there too, naturally, and two car-loads of soldiers had only arrived a little while ago, when all was over. It was said too that the Town Commandant was missing.…

No need to worry about the Commandant, said Huguenau, he himself had got him in safe keeping; and the Major had been in a pretty tight corner too, really he himself deserved a medal for lifesaving, for now the old man was being well looked after, and as he said before, quite safe.

He raised his fingers to his hat in salute, turned back the way he had come, and set out at a trot for the hospital. The dawn was already breaking.

Kühlenbeck was not to be found at first, but presently he appeared, and when he caught sight of Huguenau, bawled at him: "What do you want here, you clown?" Huguenau put on his most offended expression: "Herr Doctor Kühlenbeck, I have to report to you that Herr Esch and myself had to hide the Herr Town Commandant, who is gravely wounded, in our premises all night … will you be so good as to give instructions for him to be removed at once." Kühlenbeck rushed to the door:

"Doctor Flurschütz," he thundered down the corridor. Flurschütz came. "Take a car—the cars have returned now, haven't they?—and drive to the newspaper place, take two attendants with you … you know where it is, I suppose … but it's all one," he barked at Huguenau, "for you're going with them." Then he seemed to soften: he actually gave Huguenau his hand and said: "Come, it was very nice of you both to look after him.…"

When they reached the cellar the Major was still peacefully sleeping on his heap of potatoes, and still asleep he was carried out. Meanwhile Huguenau had run across to the editorial office. There wasn't much ready cash in the place, it was true, only the petty cash and some stamps; the rest he carried upon him, except for what he had sent to Cologne and put in the bank; but it would be a pity to leave the stamps … one never knew what might happen … perhaps there might be some more looting after all! When he returned the Major was already installed in the car, a few people were standing round it asking what had happened, and Flurschütz was preparing to drive off. It was like a blow in the face to Huguenau; they were about to take the Major away without him. And suddenly he saw clearly that he himself dared not in any circumstances stay behind, he hadn't the slightest wish to be present when Esch's body was brought home.

"Wait for me, I'm coming immediately, Doctor," he cried, "immediately!"

"How? Do you want to come with us, Herr Huguenau?"

"But of course! I've got to give my report on the whole business … just one minute, please."

He rushed upstairs. Frau Esch was praying on her knees in the kitchen. When Huguenau appeared in the doorway she made towards him, still on her knees. He did not listen to her appeals, but dashed past her into his room, seized such of his possessions as he could lay hands on-—and he did not possess much—rammed them into his fibre suitcase, sat upon it until the lock snapped to, and then flew back. "Ready," he shouted to the chauffeur, and they drove off.

At the hospital Kühlenbeck was standing in front of the door, his watch in his hand:

"Well, what's the matter with him?"

Flurschütz, who had got out first, gazed across at the Major with his somewhat inflamed eyes:

"Perhaps concussion … perhaps something more serious.…"

Kühlenbeck said:

"This place is a pure madhouse already … and it calls itself a hospital … well, we'll see.…"

The Major, who during the drive had begun to blink up at the pallid morning sky, was now wide awake. As he was being lifted out of the car he became excited; he flung himself about, and it was obvious that he was looking for something. Kühlenbeck stepped across and bent over him:

"Come, this is a nice way to behave, Herr Major!"

But at that the Major became quite furious. Whether it was that he recognized Kühlenbeck, or that he did not recognize him, at any rate he seized him by the beard, tugged at it fiercely, gnashing his teeth, and only with difficulty could be got under control. But he became peaceable and docile at once as soon as Huguenau stepped up to the stretcher. He took hold of Huguenau's finger again, Huguenau had to walk alongside the stretcher, and he would only submit to be examined so long as Huguenau sat by his side.

Kühlenbeck, however, broke off his examination very soon:

"It has no object," he said, "we'll give him an injection and then we'll just have to send him away … this place will have to be evacuated in any case … so get him off to Cologne as quickly as possible … but how? I can't spare anybody here, the order to evacuate the hospital may arrive at any moment.…

Huguenau stepped forward:

"Perhaps I could take the Herr Major to Cologne … as a voluntary ambulance attendant, if I may put it like that … the gentlemen can see for themselves that the Herr Major is satisfied with my attendance."

Kühlenbeck reflected:

"With the afternoon train? … no, that's far too uncertain now.…"

Flurschütz had an idea:

"But there must be a motor-van going to Cologne to-day … couldn't one arrange somehow or other for it to take him?"

"To-day anything can be arranged," said Kühlenbeck.

"Then may I ask you to give me a permit to proceed to Cologne?" said Huguenau.

And so it happened that Huguenau, furnished with authentic military documents, on his sleeve a red-cross armlet which he had extracted from Sister Mathilde, was given official charge of the Major, and conducted him to Cologne. They fixed up the stretcher in the van, Huguenau took up his post beside it on his fibre case, and the Major seized his hand and did not let it go again. After a while Huguenau too was overcome by fatigue. He settled himself as well as he could beside the stretcher, pushed his case under his head, and lying side by side, hand in hand, they slept like two friends. And so they arrived at Cologne.

Huguenau delivered the Major at the hospital according to orders, waited patiently by his bed until an injection had banished all danger of a new outbreak, and then he was able to steal away. From the hospital authorities he actually engineered a permit to return to his Colmar home, whereupon he lifted from the bank the remainder of the balance credited to the *Kur-Trier Herald*, and next day he departed. His war Odyssey, his lovely holiday was at an end. It was the 5th of November.

CHAPTER LXXXVI

STORY OF THE SALVATION ARMY GIRL IN BERLIN (16)

Who can be more light-hearted than an invalid? there is nothing to force him into the struggle for life, he is quite at liberty even to die if he likes. He is not obliged to draw inductive conclusions from the events of the day in order to orient his behaviour; he can remain wrapped in the cocoon of his own thoughts,—wrapped in the autonomy of his own knowledge he is free to think deductively, to think theologically. Who can be happier than the man who is at freedom to think out his religion!

Sometimes I go out by myself. I walk along slowly, my hands in my pockets, and gaze into the faces of the passers-by. They are finite faces, but often, indeed always, I can manage to discover the infinite behind them. These are, so to speak, my inductive escapades. The fact that during these roving expeditions, which certainly never take me very far—only once did I get as far as Schöneberg, and that made me very tired—I have never encountered Marie, that among all the faces hers has never emerged, that she has so completely vanished from my ken, hardly even disappoints me, for the times are uncertain, and she was always expecting to be sent away on foreign missionary service. I am quite happy without her, as it is.

The days have grown short. And as electric current is expensive and a man wrapped in the cocoon of his own autonomy can easily dispense with light, I have long nights. Nuchem often sits with me. Sits in the darkness and says little. His thoughts no doubt are with Marie, but he has never mentioned her.

Once he said:

“The war will stop now.”

“Indeed,” I said.

“Then there will be a revolution,” he went on.

I saw a chance of pouncing upon him:

“Then they will put an end to religion.”

I heard him laughing silently in the darkness:

“Is that said in your books?”

“Hegel says: it is infinite love that makes God identify Himself with what is alien to Him so as to annihilate it. So Hegel says … and then the absolute religion will come.”

He laughed again, a vague shadow in the darkness:

“The law remains,” he said.

His obduracy was unshakable: I said:

“Yes, yes, I know, you’re the eternal Jew.”

He said softly:

“We’ll go back to Jerusalem now.”

I had talked too much in any case and let the matter drop there.

CHAPTER LXXXVII

The broad keel of the ship whose port is never found
Cleaves heavy furrows in the phantom waves
That die far off in shoreless watery graves:
O sea of sleep, whose spindrift rings our void around!
Dream heavy with blind freightage! dream of founts unsealed,
Dream seeking for Another on that swift bark,
Dread longings! far more dreadful through the stark
Law by which far from land their soundless knell is pealed:
No dream has ever found another’s dream,
Lonely the night, even though Thy mighty
Wraps it, a deep from whence suspires our faith
That we some time transfigured and raised on high
May face each other in the radiant beam
Of grace, may face each other and yet not die.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII

DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES (10)

Epilogue.

All was well.

And Huguenau, furnished with an authentic military permit, had returned to his home in Colmar at the army's expense.

Had he committed a murder? had he done a revolutionary deed? he had no need to reflect upon it, nor did he do so. Had he done so, however, he might simply have said that his procedure had been quite reasonable and that any one of the town's prominent citizens, among whom, after all, he had a right to range himself, would have done exactly the same. For there was a firm line of demarcation between what was reasonable and what was unreasonable, between reality and unreality, and Huguenau would have conceded at most that in less warlike or less revolutionary times he would have left the deed undone, which would have been a pity. And he would probably have added judiciously: "There's a time for everything." But the opportunity did not arise, for he never gave a thought to that deed, nor was he ever to think of it again.

Huguenau did not think of what he had done, and still less did he recognize the irrationality that had pervaded his actions, pervaded them indeed to such an extent that one could have said the irrational had burst its bounds; a man never knows anything about the irrationality that informs his wordless actions; he knows nothing of "the invasion from below" to which he is subject, he cannot know anything about it, since at every moment he is ruled by some system of values that has no other aim but to conceal and control all the irrationality on which his earth-bound empirical life is based. The irrational, as well as consciousness, is, in the Kantian sense, a vehicle that accompanies all categories—it is the absolute of Life, running parallel, with all its instincts, conations and emotions, to the other absolute of Thought: irrationality not only supports every value-system—for the spontaneous act of positing a value, on which the value-system is based, is an irrational act—but it informs the whole general feeling of every age, the feeling which assures the prevalence of the value-system, and which both in its origin and in its nature is insusceptible to rational evidence. And the powerful apparatus of cognitive interpretation which is erected around all atomic facts to make their content plausible has the same function as that other and not less powerful apparatus of ethical interpretation which makes human conduct plausible; both of them consist of bridges thrown out by reason, crossing and recrossing at different levels, for the sole purpose of leading earthly existence out of its essential irrationality, out of "evil," by way of a higher and "reasonable" meaning up to that ultimate metaphysical value which by its deductive structure helps man to assign a fitting relevance to his own actions, to all things and to the world, but at the same time enables him to find himself again so that his vision ceases to be erratic and transient. In circumstances like these it is not surprising that Huguenau knew nothing about his own irrationality.

Every system of values springs from irrational impulses, and to transform those irrational, ethically invalid contacts with the world into something absolutely rational becomes the aim of every super-personal system of values—an essential and radical task of "formation." And every system of values comes to grief in the endeavour. For the only method that the rational can follow is that of approximation, an encircling method that seeks to reach the irrational by describing smaller and smaller arcs around it, yet never in fact reaches it, whether the irrational appears as an irrationality of one's inner feelings, an unconsciousness of what is actually being lived and experienced, or as an irrationality of world conditions and of the infinitely complex nature of the universe—all that the rational can do is to atomize it. And when people say that "a man without feelings is no man at all," they say so out of some perception of the truth that no system of values can exist without an irreducible residue of the irrational which preserves the rational itself from a literally suicidal autonomy, from a "super rationality" that is, if anything, still more objectionable, still more "evil" and "sinful" from the standpoint of the value-system, than the irrational: for, in contradistinction to the plastic irrational, the pure Ratio, arising through dialectic and deduction, becomes set and incapable of further formation when it grows autonomous, and this rigidity annuls its own logicality and brings it up against its logical limit of infinity,—when reason becomes autonomous it is thus radically evil, for in annulling the logicality of the value-system it destroys the system itself; it inaugurates the system's disintegration and ultimate collapse.

There is a stage in the development of every system of values during which the mutual interpenetration of the rational and the irrational reaches its maximum, a kind of saturated condition of equilibrium in which the elements of evil on both sides become ineffective, invisible and harmless—and these are the times of culminating achievement and of perfect style! for the style of an epoch could almost be defined in terms of this interpénétration: when such a stage of culminating achievement is reached the rational may penetrate through countless pores into life, but it remains subject to life and to the central will to value; and the irrational may flow through countless veins of the value-system, but is as it were canalized, and even in its most minute ramifications subserves and assists the central will to value,—the irrational by itself has no style, the rational by itself has no style, or rather they are both liberated from style, the one in the freedom

of Nature, the other in the freedom of mathematics; but when they are combined, when they mutually restrain each other, the result of this restrained and rational life of the irrational is the phenomenon that may be described as the peculiar style of a value-system.

But this condition of equilibrium is never permanent, it is only a transitional stage; the logic of facts drives the rational towards the super-rational, and drives the super-rational towards its limits; it initiates the process of disintegration, the splitting up of the whole value-system into partial systems, a process which ends in complete dissociation, with free and autonomous Reason on the one hand, and free and autonomous Life on the other. For a time, of course, the partial systems are still penetrated by reason and even led by reason to their own independent autonomy, to the limits of their own autonomous infinity; but the play of reason within a partial system is restricted to its immediate environment. So there arises a specific commercial kind of thinking, or a specific military kind of thinking, each of which strives towards ruthless and consistent absoluteness, each of which constructs a deductive *schema* of plausibility to suit itself, each of which has its "theology," or its "private theology," if one may call it so—and the degree of success attained by such a military or commercial theology in constructing a specific and diminished organon of its own is precisely determined by the proportion of irrational elements which have been retained in its partial system: for the partial systems also are reflections of the Self and of the total system, and they too pass through or strive towards a phase of equilibrium which gives them style, so that it is possible to speak of a military or a commercial style of living. The smaller the system becomes, however, the more restricted is its power of ethical expansion and its ethical will, the more hardened and indifferent does it become to evil, to the super-rational and to the irrational that is still alive within it, the smaller grows the number of forces at its disposal and the greater the number of those to which it is indifferent, relegating them to the individual as his private concern: the further the breaking-up of the total system proceeds, the more the reason in the world becomes detached, the more visible and effective does the irrational become. The total system of a religion makes the world that it dominates a rational world, and in the same way the independent sovereignty of reason must liberate all that is irrational and mute.

The final indivisible unit in the disintegration of values is the human individual. And the less that individual partakes in some authoritative system, and the more he is left to his own empiric autonomy—in that respect, too, the heir of the Renaissance and of the individualism that it heralded—the narrower and more modest does his "private theology" become, the more incapable is it of comprehending any values beyond its immediate and most personal environment: whatever comes from beyond the limits of its narrow circle can be accepted only in a crude and undigested state, in other words accepted as dogma—and so arises that empty and dogmatic play of conventions, that is to say of super-rationalities reduced to the smallest dimensions, which is typical of the average Philistine (a term which undeniably fits Huguenau), a play of unconflicting interaction between a living vitality sunk in the irrational and the empty form of a super-rationality that functions in a vacuum and subserves nothing but the irrational; both of them unrestrained and without style, associated in an incongruity that is incapable of creating any further value. The man who is thus outside the confines of every value-combination, and has become the exclusive representative of an individual value, is metaphysically an outcast, for his autonomy presupposes the resolution and disintegration of all system into its individual elements; such a man is liberated from values and from style, and can be influenced only by the irrational.

Huguenau, a man liberated from values, was nevertheless still a member of the commercial system; he was a man who had a good reputation in provincial business circles; he was a conscientious and prudent agent, and he had always fulfilled his commercial duties wholly and completely, even with radical thoroughness. His murder of Esch, moreover, while it hardly came within the province of his duty as a business man, was not an infringement of the business code. It had been a kind of holiday deed, committed at a time when even the commercial system of values was temporarily suspended and only individual motives remained. On the other hand it was quite in accordance with business ethics, to which Huguenau had now reverted, when in consideration of the depreciation of the mark after the conclusion of peace he addressed the following letter to Frau Gertrud Esch:

Dear Madam,

Hoping that this finds you well as it leaves me at present, I take the opportunity of reminding you that according to our contract of 14.5.1918 I am in control of 90 per cent. of the shares of the "Kur-Trier Herald," including, to be correct, 30 per cent. belonging to various gentlemen of that town, whose representative however I have the honour to be, so that without my knowledge and consent the business cannot be carried on nor any fresh commitments undertaken, and I must hold you and these gentlemen wholly and completely responsible for all possible losses arising out of any such infringement of my rights. Should you and these gentlemen, however, be continuing to issue the paper, I must beg you to remit immediately a statement of accounts and the profits accruing

to my group of shareholders, amounting to 60 per cent. of the whole (see contract § 3), and courteously reserve to myself the right of taking further action.

On the other hand, with my customary loyalty, of which you are already aware, I admit frankly that the force majeure of the war collapse has prevented me from remitting at the proper time the two remaining instalments due from me on behalf of my group, amounting in all to 13.400 marks, of which 8000 marks fall to you as heir of the late Herr August Esch. With the same frankness, however, I must point out that you, as you must admit, have neglected to send to me, as business manager of the paper, a demand note properly registered claiming the payment of these instalments before a duly fixed date, so that now, should you present the said demand note, I am merely bound to pay you that sum of money plus deferred interest in order to settle all legal claims between us.

But since I am anxious to avoid having any dispute in a law-court with the amiable wife of my late respected friend Herr August Esch, even although the property in question lies in occupied territory and my French nationality would give me the greatest advantage in any such dispute, and since moreover I prefer to have things settled out of hand, I beg to propose that we should compound our affair by mutual agreement, which would be all to your advantage, considering the legal position.

The simplest way of doing this would be for you to buy back from me, acting on behalf of my group, our 60 per cent. of shares in the business, and I am ready to sell them on the most favourable conditions; and without prejudice, unless I can dispose of them meanwhile on better terms, I offer them to you for the half of the original price, reckoned in francs at par. The total price was 13.400 marks—at par about 16,000 francs—so that I am giving you exceptionally favourable terms if I offer them at 8000 francs (eight thousand French francs), with the reminder that I have not taken into consideration at all either the sums of money I expended privately on the business, or my current expenses, or the time and labour I sacrificed on its behalf, although these alone have increased the value of the business to considerably more than when I took it over. And in adopting this generous attitude and offering you such exceptionally favourable terms, my only motive is to make things easy for you and bring about a convenient settlement, all the more as you can easily raise the money by a mortgage on your freehold, if you do not have it at hand.

Finally I take the liberty of pointing out that with my group's 60 per cent. of shares in addition to your own existing 10 per cent. you will have an overwhelming majority of 70 per cent. under your control, with which you can easily squeeze out the other minority group, and I am convinced that you will shortly find yourself sole proprietor of a flourishing business, and in this connection I cannot refrain from adding that the advertising department, after the way in which I flatter myself that I organized it, is a gold mine in itself, and that I put myself gladly at your disposal to assist you further with it by word and deed.

Under these circumstances you can quite well see that I am sacrificing my own interests in making you this offer, merely because it would be difficult for me to manage the paper from here, but I am convinced that I could get a considerably better offer from other clients, which would not redound to your advantage, and so I beg you to send me an affirmative answer within 14 days, in default of which I shall put the matter in the hands of my lawyers.

In the pleasant conviction that you will appreciate my friendly and generous proposal, so that we shall come to a complete and final settlement, I take the liberty of informing you that business in our district is extremely satisfactory and that I am doing very well, and remain

Yours respectfully

WILH. HUGUENAU.

Registered. *(André Huguenau and Co.)*

That was an ugly and oppressive proceeding, but it did not appear in that light to Huguenau; it violated neither his private theology nor that of the commercial value-system; indeed, not one of Huguenau's fellow-citizens would have found it objectionable; for no exception could have been taken to the letter on legal or commercial grounds, and even Frau Esch accepted its legality as a fate to which she could submit with a better grace than to a confiscation by communists, for instance. Huguenau himself regretted afterwards that he had been so unnecessarily modest in his demands—the half of what it had cost him!—only one must never put on the screw too much, and the 8000 francs, when they actually arrived, made a welcome contribution to the firm in Colmar, and more than that: they were the final liquidation of his war adventures, the final seal set upon his return home, and perhaps, although only perhaps, that gave him a twinge of sorrow. For now his holiday was definitely at an end. And in so far as human life, running its insignificant course, can be said to contain anything worthy of comment, nothing of the kind occurred during the rest of Huguenau's life. He had taken over his father's business, and he carried it on in the spirit of his forefathers, solidly and with an eye to profit. And since a bachelor's life is no life for a prosperous business man, and the tradition of his family, that had determined his own existence, required him to marry some worthy woman, both for the sake of having children and because her dowry could be used in

consolidating the family business, he set about taking the necessary steps to that end. And since the franc meanwhile had begun to depreciate, while the Germans had established a gold currency, it was only natural and not worth commenting on that he should look for his bride on the right bank of the Rhine. And since it was in Nassau that he eventually found a girl with a suitable dowry, and Nassau is a Protestant district, it was not surprising that love and financial advantage combined should persuade a Freethinker to change his religion. And since the bride and her family were stupid enough to attach some weight to the question, he did adopt the evangelical creed to please them. And when one or another of his fellow-citizens shook a disapproving head over such a step, Huguenau the Freethinker pointed out that it was a meaningless formality, and as if to emphasize the fact voted, in spite of his Protestantism, for the Catholic Party when it formed a political alliance in the year 1926 with the communists. And since the Alsatians, like most of the Alemanni, are often whimsical people and many of them have a slate loose somewhere, they did not wonder for very long over Huguenau's eccentricities, which were really not eccentricities at all, for Huguenau's life flowed peacefully on between sacks of coffee and bales of cloth, between sleeping and eating, between business deals and games of cards. He became the father of a family, his elastic plumpness grew rounder and in time became a little flabby; his upright walk, too, visibly degenerated into a waddle; he was courteous to his customers, and to his subordinates a strict master and a model of industry; he was out and about early every morning, he indulged in no holidays, his pleasures were few and his æsthetic enjoyments either non-existent or dismissed with contempt; his obligations left him barely time even to go for a walk on Sundays with his wife and children, so how could he visit the Museum?—he didn't care for pictures anyhow. He rose to municipal honours, his feet were again on the path of duty. His life was the same life that his physical forbears had led for two hundred years, and his face was their face. They all resembled each other strongly, the Huguenaus, fat and complacent and serious in their folds of solid flesh, and it was hardly to be suspected that one of them should develop an ironically sarcastic expression. But whether this peculiarity was the result of mixed blood, or was merely a freak of nature, or marked a certain maturity in this descendant of the Huguenaus, a maturity that detached him from the family tree, it is difficult to determine, and in any case it was not considered important by anybody, least of all by Huguenau. For many things had become indifferent to Huguenau, and whenever his war adventures came into his mind they shrank into smaller and smaller compass, until at last all that remained was a single entry of 8000 francs in which they were symbolized and which was their final balance; and all that he had experienced at that time faded into a mere silhouette, into the delicate half-tones of the French banknotes that Huguenau the business man had been handling ever since. The soft grey shadow of dream-like and silvery sleep drew a veil over all that had happened; it grew more and more vague, more and more shadowy, as if a darkened glass had been set before it, and in the end he could not tell whether he had lived that life or whether it was a tale someone had told him.

It could perhaps be argued that all this fading away and forgetting was merely symptomatic of a state of resignation induced by the fact that the bourgeois system of values had been set up again in Alsace, including Colmar, of course, with the help of the victorious French bayonets, although the land itself, thanks to the wrongs it had had to suffer for centuries from right and left alike, was still as full of revolutionary spirit as any other frontier region, and even in Huguenau rebellion was still raising its head. It could be argued in any case that irrational forces once liberated are unwilling to submit themselves again to any old system of values, and that if they are compelled to submission they must necessarily diffuse a blight of deadness over the community and the individual alike. And out of that arises the problem of what happens to the irrational forces liberated by the disintegration of values: are they really nothing but fighting forces in the struggle between the several value-systems? are they really nothing but means for mutual destruction? are they really nothing but murder? and when the disintegration of values has gone as far as it can go in a reduction to the final indivisible units, to a struggle between one individual and another, must these guerrilla forces inevitably provoke a general dissension, a struggle of all against all? Or, to confine the question to Huguenau's particular case: can a partial value-system, such as the commercial one to which Huguenau reverted, possess a sufficient power of cohesion without external help from bayonets or police truncheons to combine the dissociated irrational impulses into a new organon, and to provide a new focus for the equally dissociated will-to-value?

Epistemologically, of course, these questions are inadmissible, since they make assumptions regarding the nature of the irrational. By the mere use of the word "forces" they assume a mechanistic theory and an anthropomorphic and voluntarist metaphysic; in short, they give a meaning to the irrational, and the irrational invalidates any meaning attached to it. In its original and undifferentiated condition the irrational admits of no theorizing and no interpretation beyond the simple affirmation of its anonymous existence, even although its living inarticulateness provides all the material for rational value-formations. This recalcitrance of the irrational is fully recognized by the total system superimposed upon it, that is to say by

the religious system, the system of the Church. The Church recognizes only one value-system, her own, because her Platonic origin compels her to acknowledge only one Truth, only one Logos: her wholly rational alignment rules out any tolerance of the illogical, and compels her *a priori* to deny to the irrational and its hypothetical "attributes" any epistemological or even ethical significance. For the Church the irrational is simply the bestial, and all that can be said about it is that it is there and must be subsumed in the category of evil. From this point of view the irrational presents no problem for consideration, except in relation to the question of how evil can possibly exist within a world created by God; and the alleged capacity of the irrational to construct systems is not even considered except in reference to the possible ways in which evil can become manifest. True, these are questions which the Church has never ignored nor ever can ignore; the existence of evil is a necessary presupposition for the *ecclesia militans*, and since the progressive disintegration of values releases continuous manifestations of evil, the Church is constantly forced to stigmatize as evil whatever causes the disintegration; in other words, the Church has to discard the super-rational and relegate it to the category of evil along with the irrational. But since the Church on the one hand knows as well as any private person that every manifestation is the "product of a product," knowing perhaps even more clearly than any private person that the condition of possible experience for all manifestations is determined by some "value," and since on the other hand she must regard her own value-structure as the only admissible one, she is bound to maintain that irrational evil, while incapable of constructing a system, is yet capable of aping the form of an existent system in order to manifest itself, and whatever its manifestations, she will regard them merely as imitations of her own structure; she is bound to maintain that evil, while it cannot think rationally, is yet capable of an empty aping of thought, a thought without true content (evil as the *privatio* of good), an empty, super-rational and dogmatic play of conventions, a kind of sophistry led astray by the irrational, subserving only the irrational, perverting the ethical will into an empty echo of moral maxims; but a sophistry that ultimately swells to the dimensions of a total system and raises evil from the Philistine level to the dignity of an Antichrist. For the Church the more completely evil establishes itself in the world, the more completely is Christ menaced by the mock Antichrist, the more menacing becomes the value-system of the Antichrist, which has to be a total system simply because the system of the Church is already a total system; so the Church sees evil spreading itself and becoming indivisible and homogeneous like the opposing truth which it imitates. Such a total system of evil as conceived by the Church throws into the shade all partial systems, and the most outstanding expression of the disintegration of values, the Protestant idea, acquires in the eyes of Catholicism a preponderant significance among the phenomena of disintegration, being regarded as the main idea, the *leit-motif*, in that fateful and irrational process, although Protestantism and all other partial systems are looked upon as merely distorted reflections of the true value, preliminary stages for the menacing total system of Antichrist which is to come. This estimate of Protestantism not only accords with the Church's special point of view, but has some foundation in objective fact, in the fact, for instance, that Protestantism displays a remarkable affinity with every other partial system of whatever kind: let it be capitalist or nationalist or what you will, every partial system can be brought under the same "revolutionary" anti-Catholic denominator as Protestantism; from the Church's point of view, that is to say, they all belong to the criminal category in which the irrational value-destroying forces of heresy are manifest. And although the Church often makes external concessions and, preferring the lesser evil to the greater, appears to tolerate this or the other separatist movement, such as a nationalist movement, as a nucleus of conservation against the more radical and purely revolutionary sects, yet she will never abandon the severity of her attitude towards the fundamental problem of how to align the irrational forces: for her it means either Christ or Antichrist, either a return into the bosom of the Church or the downfall of the world in the complete disintegration of values caused by the internecine struggle.

Every partial system, considered as a value-system, must imitate the structure of the total system, whether it be a simple reflection of that or its distorted perversion, and in so far as the tenets of the original system are based on formal principles, they must be reproduced and confirmed in the smaller sect; substantive differences, however, in the interpretation of these tenets, differences which are inevitable because no system can admit that it is "evil," must arise from a different orientation towards the irrational. The logical genesis, the logical basis of every partial system compels it to be revolutionary: a nationalist movement, for instance, following its logical development towards an absolute, sets up an organon in which the National State takes the central place of God, and in thus relating all values to the idea of the State, in thus subordinating the individual and his spiritual freedom to the power of the State, it not only finds itself in a revolutionary anti-capitalist position, but is even more stringently propelled in an anti-religious, anti-ecclesiastical direction which leads by a plain, undeviating path to the absolute revolutionary disintegration of values, and so, of course, to the ultimate supersession of the partial system itself. If a partial system, therefore, is to secure its continued existence in this process of disintegration, if it is to be able to bridle its

own Ratio which hurries it towards ultimate extinction, it must take refuge in an alliance with the irrational. Thus arises that remarkable ambiguity characterizing every partial system, an ambiguity which amounts to dishonesty, epistemologically speaking: on the one hand the partial system adopts the attitude of a total system towards the process of advancing disintegration and stigmatizes the irrational as rebellious and criminal, while on the other hand it is compelled to distinguish among the homogeneous mass of irrationality and anonymous wickedness a group of "good" irrational forces which are needed to help it in checking further disintegration and in establishing its own claim to survival. Every half-way revolution, and in this sense all partial systems are half-way revolutions, bases its case on irrational assumptions, on mass feeling, on the dignity of an "irrational inspiration" that is exploited to discredit the radical logic of complete revolution; every partial system must expressly acknowledge a residue of "unformed" irrationality, which it maintains, so to speak, as a private preserve exempt from reason, in order to keep itself stable in the flux of disintegration.

For revolutions are insurrections of evil against evil, insurrections of the irrational against the rational, insurrections of the irrational masquerading as extreme logical reasoning against rational institutions complacently defending themselves by an appeal to irrational sentiment: revolutions are struggles between unreality and unreality, between tyranny and tyranny, and they are inevitable once the release of the super-rational has drawn in its train the release of the irrational, once the disintegration of values has advanced to its last integral unit, the individual; for the individual, isolated and autonomous, stripped of all prejudice, is defenceless before the invasion of the irrational. Revolution is the breaking through of the irrational, the breaking through of the autonomous, the breaking through of life, and the isolated human being, stripped of values, is its instrument; and since the human outcast is the first to suffer the extremes of human misery and loneliness, the proletarian, for instance, victimized by hunger, or the soldier in the trenches victimized by intensive artillery fire, and since these literal outcasts must be the first to achieve freedom from values, they must also be the first to hear the voice of murder that drowns the muteness of the irrational with its clangour as of iron ringing upon iron. And it is always the adherent of the smaller value-system who slays the adherent of the larger system that is breaking up; it is always he, unfortunate wretch, who assumes the rôle of executioner in the process of value-disintegration, and on the day when the trumpets of judgment sound it is the man released from all values who becomes the executioner of a world that has pronounced its own sentence.

Huguenau had committed a murder. He forgot it afterwards; it never came into his mind again, while every single business *coup* that he had successfully brought off (his letter to Frau Esch!) remained accurately imprinted on his memory. And that was only natural: for none of our actions remains alive except those that consort with our reigning system of values, and Huguenau had reverted once more to the commercial system. And in exactly the same way, had circumstances been more favourable, he could have become as staunch a supporter of revolution as he was now of commerce, even although he was heir to a flourishing family business. For the proletarian who supports a revolution is not essentially the "revolutionist" he thinks himself; there is no difference, for instance, between the crowd that exulted in the quartering of Damien, the man who attempted a King's assassination, and the crowd that thronged thirty-five years later around the guillotine of a King, Louis XVI.—the revolutionist as an independent figure does not exist, he is merely the exponent of something greater than himself, the exponent in this case of the European spirit. The individual man may be sunk in a Philistine life, he may even be set in the mould of an old partial system; like Huguenau he may land in the commercial system; or he may attach himself to a preliminary revolutionary movement or to the definitive revolution; but none the less the spirit of positivistic disintegration is spread over all the Occidental world, nor is its visible expression restricted to the materialism of the Russian proletariat, which is merely one variation of the positivism into which the whole of Western philosophy, in so far as it can still be called philosophy, has resolved itself. Compared with this greater unity dissensions about the distribution of wealth sink into the background, although even there the distinction between Americanized methods of organization and communist methods is becoming less and less noticeable: our thought-patterns are moving with increasing urgency towards a common conclusion, a conclusion that makes it irrelevant whether the stamp of this or the other political party is affixed to it, since its whole significance, fundamentally speaking, lies solely in the fact that it is capable of becoming a total system and of once more combining the insurgent forces of the irrational. That is why a preliminary revolution based on the irrational does not matter in the long run, whether it is abortive or not; for it cannot prevent the definitive rational revolution into which it must inevitably be drawn, although as a temporary phenomenon it may be useful in revealing what a more complete system cannot reveal: that there are irrational forces, that they are effective, and that their very nature impels them to attach themselves to a new organon of values, to a total system which in the eyes of the Church can be no other than that of Antichrist. This judgment of the Church is not based on the appearance of such subordinate

symptoms as the fanatical anti-Platonism of the communists, or the rationalist propaganda of Marxist or bourgeois Freethinkers; that kind of atheism, sinful as it may be, is too insignificant, indeed too pathetic, in the eyes of the Church, to be named in the same breath as the evil of Antichrist: what concerns the Church is the whole spirit of Europe, the "heretical" spirit of immediacy, of positivism, in face of which it does not really matter whether Protestantism is the progenitor of revolutionary nationalism by way of Fichte or, more obviously, of Marxian communism by way of Hegel; and although the Church, with the unfailing intuition of hatred, the hatred of heresy, can identify Protestantism in its remotest offshoots, and for that very reason denounces communism with an intransigence otherwise inexplicable, since she could quite well accept the primitive Christian conceptions underlying it, yet for all that the concrete phenomenon of communism is not yet the final formal elaboration of Antichrist, but merely a preliminary phase. It is not yet a total system in itself, even although it displays a regular Marxist theology derived from the Protestant theology of Kantianism, and a strictly expounded doctrine with a fixed ontology and an unassailable ethic; even although, indeed, it is provided with all the concomitants of a regular theology organized into what looks like a visible church, and although that church is deliberately setting itself up as an anti-church with machines as the apparatus of its cult and engineers and demagogues as its priesthood; it is not yet a total system as such, it is not yet Antichrist, but a preliminary phase, an indication of the approaching disintegration of the Christian-Platonic world. And in this dogmatic structure, in this uprearing of a Marxist anti-church with an ascetic and severe conception of the State, it is already possible clearly to discern—and no one discerns it more clearly than the Catholic Church—the gigantic contour of a spirit that rises far beyond Marxism, far beyond the apotheosis of the State, a spirit that is so far ahead of revolutionary doctrine of any kind that it makes even Marxism look like a circuitous advance: it is the contour of a churchless "Church in itself," the ontology of an abstract natural science without substance, an abstract ethic without dogma; in short, an organon of that severe and logical ultimate abstraction which is attained when the point of plausibility has receded into the infinite, and in which all the radicality of Protestantism is evident. It is the positivism that characterized Luther and the whole Renaissance, the same double affirmation of the given world and of the need for ascetic severity, a doctrine that is now fulfilling its essential implications and tending towards a new unity of Thought and Being, towards a new unity of ethical and material infinity. It is the unity which informs every system of theology and which must endure even if the attempt is made to deny the reality of Thought, but which takes on a new lease of life when the scientific point at which things are assumed as true coincides with the point at which things are believed to be true, so that the double truth once more becomes single and unambiguous. For at the end of the infinite line of inquiry which leads to this point there stands the pure deed-in-itself, the idea of a pure organon of abstract duty, the idea of a rational belief without a God; there stands the unyielding Law of an abstract religion devoid of content, perhaps even the rational immediacy of an abstract mysticism whose wordless asceticism and unornamented religiosity, governed by austerity and by austerity alone, points the way to the last goal of this completely Protestant revolution: the unaccented vacuum of a ruthless absoluteness in which is throned the abstract Spirit of God, God's Spirit, not Himself and yet Himself, reigning in sorrow amid the terror of dreamless, unbroken silence that constitutes the pure Logos.

In this predicament of the European spirit Huguenau was scarcely involved at all, but he was involved in the prevailing uncertainty. For the irrational in man has an affinity with the irrational in the world; and although the uncertainty in the world is, so to speak, a rational uncertainty, often, indeed, merely an economic uncertainty, yet it springs from the irrationality of the super-rational, from an independent reason that strives towards infinity in every province of human activity, and so, reaching the super-rational limits of its infinity, overthrows itself and becomes irrational, passing beyond comprehension. Currency hitherto accepted becomes incalculable, standards fluctuate, and, in spite of all the explanations that can be adduced to account for the irrational, what is finite fails to keep pace with the infinite and no reasonable means avail to reduce the irrational uncertainty of the infinite to sense and reason again. It is as though the infinite awakens to a concrete and independent life of its own, informed and drawn out by the Absolute that glimmers on the farthest horizon in this hour between downfall and uprising, in this magical hour of death and birth. And Huguenau, although he might avert his eyes from that distant dawn and refuse to acknowledge anything of the kind, could not but feel the icy breath sweeping over the world, freezing it to rigidity and withering all meaning out of the things of the world. And when Huguenau followed each morning the chronicle of events in his newspaper he did so with the uneasiness of all newspaper readers who greedily clutch at the facts presented to them, especially those facts that are supplemented by illustrations, in the daily and renewed hope that the mass of facts may fill the emptiness of a world that has fallen silent, the emptiness of a soul that has fallen silent. They read their newspapers and in their hearts is the terror that comes from awakening every morning to loneliness, for the speech of the old community life has failed them and that of the new is too faint for them to hear. They sustain, indeed, a pose of

understanding and clear-sightedness by sharply criticizing the political and social situation or the working of the legal system, and they even exchange opinions on these subjects during the course of the day; but in reality they are without a language, standing mutely between what has been and what is not yet; they give no credence to words and require them to be confirmed by pictures, they have even ceased to believe in the adequacy of their own utterances, and thus caught between an end and a beginning they know only that the logic of facts is ruthless and that the Law remains unassailable: there is no soul, however degenerate, however base, however Philistine and devoted to the tritest dogmas, that can avoid this knowledge and this terror,—like a child surprised and overwhelmed by loneliness, a prey to the terror of the creature that has begun to die, man must go seeking the fordable passage that shall at last assure his life and his safety. Nowhere does he find help. And it is in vain that he strives continuously to find a haven in some partial system; in vain he may expect to be sheltered from uncertainty in old romantic structures, or hope that in a partial revolution all that is known and familiar to him will yield only with the utmost slowness, in a kind of painless transition, to what is inexorably alien,—he can get no help, for he finds himself cozened by the false glamour of a sham communal life, and the deeper, more secret relationship he is groping for flutters from the hand that thought to grasp it; and even if in his disappointment he takes refuge in the monetary-commercial system still he cannot escape disappointment: even that most characteristic mode of the bourgeois existence, that partial system which is hardier than all others because it promises an unshakable unity in the world, the unity that man needs to reassure his uncertainty—two marks are always more than one mark and a sum of eight thousand francs is made up of many francs and yet is a whole, a rational organon in terms of which the world can be reckoned up—even that hardy and enduring growth, in which the bourgeois desires so strongly to believe even while all currencies are tottering, is beginning to wither away; the irrational cannot be kept out at any point, and no vision of the world can any longer be reduced to a sum in rational addition. And even Wilhelm Huguenau, now a prosperous business man risen to municipal honours, a man whose first inquiry about everything in life usually concerned its price and the profit it might yield, even Wilhelm Huguenau, although he thought it quite rational in such times of financial insecurity to show a more suspicious face to the world, even he found himself at times ironically shrugging off something, or with a sweeping gesture trying to brush away something that, strangely enough, he could not account for at all; and then in sudden perplexity he would ask “What is money?” and sometimes even refuse credit to a customer, after mustering him with a sharp, suspicious look, simply because he took a dislike to the man or objected to something in his expression, a sarcastic twitch of the lips, perhaps—and whether this capriciousness served him well or ill, whether it drove a potentially good customer into the arms of a rival or got rid of a bad customer at the right moment, quite apart from all practical considerations it was an abrupt method, though, perhaps, a lucid one, that resulted from a kind of short-circuiting; it was in any case unusual in business dealings, undoubtedly irrational, and probably largely responsible for the gulf that imperceptibly began to widen between Huguenau and his fellow-citizens as if he were isolated in a dead zone of silence. Huguenau had but the vaguest inkling of its existence, yet its outlines became less vague and almost palpable as soon as he found himself in any social gathering, in a cinema, or in a beer-hall where young people were dancing, or at banquets celebrating the anniversary of the French triumph: on such occasions Huguenau, himself a probable future Burgomaster, would sit among the other notables at the flower-decked table and watch the dancers with a serious, vacant, boyish gaze behind his thick eyeglasses, and although he was by no means of an age to renounce dancing, yet he could hardly believe it himself when he whispered to his neighbour (as he never omitted to do) that at one time he had been a good enough dancer. For whether he was sitting in such a patriotic assembly or strolling on Sundays with his eldest boy along the Strassburger Allee to watch the bicycle races, he found himself falling irresistibly into a strange state of uneasiness, so that he even began to attend social gatherings merely to put himself to the test; it was an uneasiness in which things imperceptibly moved out of their places and in which every social gathering, although it ought to have presented an integral aspect, began to disintegrate into something that was disconcertingly multifarious, something that somebody or other, by means of decorations, garlands and banners, had combined into an artificial unity, against his own better judgment. And if Huguenau had not shied off from such out-of-the-way thoughts he would undoubtedly have discovered that there is not a single idea, not a single name, that has a corresponding concrete unity underlying it; he would certainly have discovered that the unity of any event and the integrity of the world are guaranteed merely by enigmatic, although visible, symbols, which are necessary because without them the visible world would fall asunder into unnameable, bodiless, dry layers of cold and transparent ash—and so Huguenau would have perceived the curse of the casual, of the fortuitous, that spreads itself over things and their relations to each other, making it impossible to think of any arrangement that would not be equally arbitrary and fortuitous: would not the racing bicyclists have to scatter to the four winds if they were no longer combined by a common uniform and a common club

badge? Huguenau did not ask such a question, for it exceeded the grasp of what might be called, not without reason, his private theology; yet the unasked question irritated him no less than the elusiveness of the experiences that worried him, and his irritation might, for instance, discharge itself in boxing his child on the ear for no reason at all on the way home. Having relieved his feelings in this manner, however, he found it easy to come back to sober reality, thus confirming Hegel's maxim: "Real freedom of will is a harmony between the theoretical and the practical spirit." In the best of tempers he would march back into the town, past the various churches out of which the congregations were just emerging, humming merrily to himself as he went and beating time with his stick, and whenever he met an acquaintance he would greet him and say "Salut."

For everything ultimately depends on one's relation to freedom, and even the pettiest and narrowest theology that extends merely far enough to make plausible the meanest actions of an empirical ego, in other words even the private theology of a Huguenau, is enlisted in the service of freedom, and regards freedom as the real centre of its deductions, its real mystic centre (and that was true for Huguenau at least from the day on which he deserted his trench in the grey dawn, thus following out an apparently irrational but none the less highly rational course of action in the service of freedom, so that everything he had striven towards since that day and everything he was yet to strive for in his life could be taken as a repetition of his actions in that first high-day and holiday mood): indeed it is almost as if freedom were in a lofty category by itself, soaring high above all that is rational and irrational, like an end and a beginning, resembling the Absolute with which its light is blended and yet which it surpasses, as if it were an ultimate, serene ray shining beyond the fiery caverns of the opening heavens. The irrational could never attach itself to the rational, nor the rational diffuse itself in the harmony of living feeling, were they not both partakers in an overarching and majestic Being which is at once the highest reality and the profoundest unreality: it is only in this conjunction of reality and unreality that the wholeness of the world and its form can be apprehended; it is the idea of freedom that justifies the continued rebirth of humanity, for it can never be realized on earth and the road that leads to it must ever be trodden anew. Oh, agonizing compulsion towards freedom! terrible and ever-renewed revolution of knowledge! which justifies the insurrection of Absolute against Absolute, the insurrection of life against reason—justifying reason when, apparently at variance with itself, it unleashes the absolute of the irrational against the absolute of the rational, justifying it by providing the final assurance that the unleashed irrational forces will once more combine into a value-system. There is no value-system that does not subordinate itself to freedom; even the most reduced system is groping towards freedom, even the outcast victim of all earthly loneliness and detachment, the man who achieves no more than the freedom to commit a murder, the freedom to enter prison, or at most the freedom of a deserter, even he, the man stripped of all values, on whom all earthly compulsions press—there is no man exposed to the breath of the Eternal who does not once see the star of freedom rising in the night of his isolation: each man must fulfil his dream, unhallowed or holy, and he does so to have his share of freedom in the darkness and dullness of his life. And so Huguenau often had the feeling that he was sitting in some pit or dark cavern looking out over a cold zone that lay like a girdle of loneliness around his station, while life streamed in distant pictures over the dusky firmament, and then he had a great yearning to creep out of his pen and share in the freedom and loneliness outside, the existence of which he vaguely guessed at as if it were a vision blown in from somewhere or other upon him alone; it was like a knowledge of the deepest community of the spirit into which that most profound loneliness must inevitably change, but it never got beyond the dull conviction that out there it would be somehow or other possible to compel people to be warm and friendly, to compel them by threats of murder or violence, or at least by a box on the ear, to accept him and to listen to his truth, which he was yet incapable of articulating. For even although he was scarcely distinguishable from others in his actions and his mode of life, even although he ran more and more surely on the lines that had been laid down for him in youth, and that he never thought of leaving again, even although it was an utterly carnal, yes, a solid life that was advancing in him towards death, yet in a certain sense it grew more lofty and airy as he felt himself daily more cut off and isolated while ceasing to suffer from the isolation: cut off from the world and yet in it, he saw men receding from him into regions ever more remote and more longed-for, but he made no attempt to explore that far country; and in thus resigning himself he again showed his complete likeness to all other mortals. For every man knows that human life does not stretch far enough for a journey to the end of the path that mounts like a spiral road to higher and higher reaches, the path on which all that has vanished behind one's back rises again in front on a loftier level, only to fade into the distant haze with every fresh step one takes: that endless course of the closed circle and of fulfilment, that lucid reality in which things fall asunder and recede to the poles, to the uttermost limits of the world where all that has been sundered is again joined into one, where distance is again annulled and the irrational takes on its visible shape, where fear no more becomes longing and longing no more turns into fear, where the freedom of the self is received again into the Platonic freedom of

God; that endless course of the closed circle and of fulfilment that can be trodden only by him who has fulfilled his nature—unattainable for any man.

Unattainable for any man! And even if Huguenau had landed in a revolutionary instead of in a commercial system he would still have been barred from entering on the path of fulfilment. For murder remains murder, evil remains evil, and the Philistinism of a value-system whose field is restricted to the individual and his irrational impulses, that last product of every disintegration of values, remains the point of absolute degeneracy; the point, so to speak, of an invariant absolute zero that is common to all scales of value and all value-systems without reference to their mutual relativity, and that must be common to all of them since no value-system can be conceived unless in its idea and logical nature it observes the "condition of possible experience," the empirical draft of a logical structure common to all systems and of an *a priori* immutability that is bound up with the Logos. And it almost seems like an outcrop of the same logical necessity that the transition from any value-system to a new one must pass through that zero-point of atomic dissolution, must take its way through a generation destitute of any connection with either the old or the new system, a generation whose very detachment, whose almost insane indifference to the suffering of others, whose stark denudation of values provides an ethical and so an historical justification for the ruthless rejection in times of revolution of all that is humane. And perhaps it must be so, since only such a silent and self-contained generation is able to endure the sight of the Absolute and the rising glare of freedom, the light that flares out over the deepest darkness, and only over the deepest darkness: the earthly reflection of the Absolute is like an image in a dark pool, and the earthly echo of its silence is the iron clangour of murder, which yet sends mute vibrations rolling like an impenetrable wall of deafening silence between man and man, so that no voice can rise beyond it or through it, and man must tremble. Dread reflection, dread echo of the Ratio bursting its way through to the Absolute! its ruthlessness finds an earthly counterpart in violence and mute force, and the rational immediacy of its divine end becomes on earth the immediacy of the irrational that forces men to reluctant yet dumb obedience; its endless chain of inquiry is reduced on earth to the single link of the irrational that asks no more questions but merely acts, setting out to destroy a community of life that has ceased to justify its existence, a so-called community devoid of force but filled with evil will, a community that drowns itself in blood and chokes in its own poison-gases. What a lonely death is the earthly counterpart of divine isolation! Man, exposed to the horror of unrestrained reason, bidden to serve it without comprehending it, caught in the toils of a process that develops far over his head, caught in the toils of his own irrationality, man is like the savage who is bewitched by black magic and cannot see the connection between means and effect, he is like the madman who cannot find his way out of the tangle of his Irrational and Super-rational, he is like the criminal who cannot find his way into the value-realities of the community he desires to enter. Irrevocably the past escapes him, irrevocably the future flees from him, and the droning of machines gives him no indication of the path to his goal that rises unattainable and formless in the haze of the infinite, bearing aloft the black torch of the Absolute. Dread hour of death and of birth, dread hour of the Absolute sustained by a generation that has extinguished itself, a generation that knows nothing about the infinite into which it is driven by its own logic—inexperienced, helpless, and insensate, the men of this generation are delivered to the icy hurricane, they must forget in order to live and they do not know why they die. Their path is the path of Ahasuerus, their duty is his duty, their freedom is the freedom of the hunted creature and their aim is forgetfulness. Lost generation! as non-existent as Evil itself, featureless and traditionless in the morass of the indiscriminate, doomed to lose itself temporally, to have no tradition in an age that is making absolute history! Whatever the individual man's attitude to the course of the revolution, whether he turns reactionary and clings to outworn forms, mistaking the æsthetic for the ethical as all conservatives do, or whether he holds aloof in the passivity of egoistic knowledge, or whether he gives himself up to his irrational impulses and applies himself to the destructive work of the revolution:

he remains unethical in his destiny, an outcast from his epoch, an outcast from Time,

yet nowhere and never is the spirit of the epoch so strong, so truly ethical and historical as in that last and first flare-up which is revolution, that act of self-elimination and self-renewal, the last and greatest ethical achievement of the old disintegrating system and the first achievement of the new, the moment when time is annulled and history radically formed in the pathos of the absolute zero!

Great is the anguish of the man who becomes aware of his isolation and seeks to escape from his own memory; he is obsessed and outcast, flung back into the deepest animal anguish, into the anguish of the creature that suffers violence and inflicts violence, flung back into an overwhelming loneliness in which his flight and his despair and his stupor may become so great that he cannot help thinking of inflicting violence on himself so as to escape the immutable law of events. And in his fear of the voice of judgment that threatens to issue from the darkness, there awakens within him a doubly strong yearning for a Leader to take him tenderly and lightly by the hand, to set things in order and show him the way; a Leader who is

nobody's follower and who will precede him on the un-trodden path of the closed circle and lead him on to ever-higher reaches, to an ever-brighter revelation; the Leader who will build the house anew that the dead may come to life again, and who himself has risen again from the multitude of the dead; the Healer who by his own actions will give a meaning to the incomprehensible events of the age, so that Time can begin anew. That is his yearning. Yet even if the Leader were to come the hoped-for miracle would not happen; his life would be an ordinary life on earth; and just as belief has taken on the disguise of provisional assumption, and assumption that of belief in rational religion, so the healer walks in the most unlikely guise and may even be the casual passer-by now crossing the street—for wherever he walks, whether in the turmoil of city streets or in the light of evening fields, his road is the road to Zion and yet the road we must all take; his journey is a search for the fordable passage between the evil of the irrational and the evil of the super-rational, and his freedom is the anguished freedom of duty, is sacrifice and expiation for the past; even for him the way is the way of trial, determined by austerity, and his isolation is that of a lost child, is that of the lost son whose bourne fades into the unattainable since he has been abandoned by his father. And despite all that: the mere hope of wisdom from a Leader is wisdom for us, the mere divination of grace is grace, and unavailing as may be our hope that in a Leader's visible life the Absolute will one day fulfil itself on earth, yet our goal remains accessible, our hope that a Messiah will lead us to it remains imperishable, and the renascence of values is fated to recur. And hemmed in as we may be by the increasing muteness of the abstract, each man a victim of the iciest necessity, flung into nothingness, his ego flung to the winds—it is the breath of the Absolute that sweeps across the world, and from our dim inklings and gropings for truth there will spring up the high-day and holiday assurance with which we shall know that every man has the divine spark in his soul and that our oneness cannot be forfeited; unforfeitable the brotherhood of humble human creatures, from whose deepest anguish there shines unforfeitable and unforfeited the anguish of a divine grace, the oneness of all men, gleaming in all things, beyond all Space and all Time; the oneness in which all light has its source and from which springs the healing of all living things—symbol of a symbol, image of an image, emerging from the destiny that is sinking in darkness, welling up out of madness and dreamlessness like the gift of maternal life wrested from the unknown and rewon as a heritage, the prototype of all imagery rising in the insurrection of the irrational, blotting out the self and transcending its confines, annulling time and distance; in the icy hurricane, in the tempest of collapse all the doors spring open, the foundations of our prison are troubled, and from the profoundest darkness of the world, from our bitterest and profoundest darkness the cry of succour comes to the helpless, there sounds the voice that binds all that has been to all that is to come, that binds our loneliness to all other lonelinesses, and it is not the voice of dread and doom; it falters in the silence of the Logos and yet is borne on by it, raised high over the clamour of the non-existent; it is the voice of man and of the tribes of men, the voice of comfort and hope and immediate love: "Do thyself no harm! for we are all here!"

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Acerca de *Los sonámbulos*

HERMANN BROCH O EL PACIFISTA IRÓNICO

Como una piel contraída por la invasión súbita del frío exterior ante el sobresalto interior, Viena despertó estremecida —pero crepuscularmente lúcida— ante el impacto atronador, y gaseado, de la Primera Guerra europea. El siglo xx iniciaba en su caso el paradigma del principio y el fin de una era que en su espacio urbano e intelectual materializaba las líneas de T. S. Eliot: «*In my Beginnig is my End, in my End is my Beginning*».

Viena había capitalizado la ensoñación patricia europea, concentrada en el ámbito centroriental del Viejo Continente: once nacionalidades, etnias variadas y confesiones religiosas de difícil o quimérica convivencia. Bajo el imperio, o la inercia latente de un poder con la sola fuerza de su declive, la armonía de un mundo con tres ciudades imperiales (Praga y Budapest además de las que asumía una titularidad hipotecada) no era sino el presentimiento de su desintegración.

Roto, o transformado si se prefiere, el mundo no era ya el mítico y paterno-familiar del nombre de Francisco José —sesenta y ocho años de mando, con bastón, y no de mando los últimos—; las nuevas realidades iban a imponerse. Para el vienés, esa figura que concentra avances científicos, preocupación minuciosa por el lenguaje y conciencia de la crisis que en los cambios mismos de su espacio se manifiesta, el latido de la alarma supone un llamamiento irrenunciable a la reflexión.

Las ambiciones de poder y sus resabios iban a redibujar con sus tropelías, o a restablecer con sus reivindicaciones, un mapa que seguiría quebrando y recosiendo a lo largo del siglo xx las costuras de unas fronteras tan lábiles como lo requirieran la tensión y el tesón —o el empecinamiento— de sus identidades.

Hermann Broch —un «autor a pesar suyo» (*Dichter wider Willen*), como lo definió su amiga Hannah Arendt— vivió práctica y literariamente como ingeniero y hombre de empresa hasta pasar a su vocación artística, el clima humanístico de Viena, pero también la vanidad de sus varias correcciones oficiales, el exceso de ornamentación como disfraz de su vacío. En su ensayo sobre «Hofmannsthal y su tiempo» (incluido en *Poesía e investigación*, Barcelona, Barral, 1974), traza un diagnóstico preciso y elocuente al respecto. El sentido crítico que revelan las páginas en torno al gran poeta y su ciudad, escritas hacia el final de su vida en Estados Unidos, presidía ya las líneas de su trilogía *Los sonámbulos*. De 1888 a 1918, y al frágil amparo del Romanticismo, sitúa en la Prusia finisecular, y en las conflictivas zonas industriales de Alemania, el teatro de unas circunstancias y personajes representativos de un común escenario germánico. No descuida algún paraíso provisional contemplativo, y aun abismático, para mostrar el lado de sombra que gravita en sus desapoderados protagonistas, y les confiere un relieve superior que ellos mismos ignoran.

La especulación a propósito de paisajes mentales (que parecen ávidos de hablar al alma) y el registro de las realidades de un capitalismo sin contemplaciones, con progresos tan evidentes como sus crímenes, conforman esta trilogía. Hermann Broch, vienés, sensible, auscultador de los vientos del espíritu, dialoga narrativamente con el lector, y lo sitúa en una Alemania predominante y aglutinadora que por su experiencia empresarial conocía bien. *Los sonámbulos* conforman una reflexión ejemplar para comprender, más allá de las geografías estrictas del texto, el devenir de una Europa que, después de 1945 —con Dachau y Auschwitz y Coventry y Dresde—, parece, sobre todo, una promesa incumplida.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO
Barcelona, Sant Vicenq de Montalt,
marzo de 2006

PRÓLOGO

LA CONCIENCIA DE UN ESCRITOR

Notas preliminares

La exigencia estilística y la pasión reflexiva, junto al afán de conocimiento, son las características esenciales de la producción literaria de Hermann Broch. Enfrentado a los desafíos y enigmas del siglo xx, su dedicación artística jamás le distrajo de su responsabilidad ante la gravedad del drama humano. De ahí la complejidad de sus páginas y la tensión conflictiva que manifiestan. Amante de la vida en sus varios aspectos (las páginas descriptivas de paisajes alpinos o de vistas al mar y de rostros humanos así lo demuestran), Broch pulsó su lado de sombra desde finales del siglo XIX a 1918 en la trilogía *Los sonámbulos*. Sus protagonistas son aristócratas extraviados en sus códigos, empleados contables insatisfechos y burgueses resultantes de un pragmatismo que arrasará con todos los valores. Desde la renuncia a los idealismos hasta la fijación en el poder, sin olvidar que son vulnerables, estos personajes pretenden dominar a los otros o descubrirse en ellos. Descritos con ironía y piedad, son la ilustración de las dificultades de un humanismo europeo siempre en crisis.

La experiencia humana del escritor, sus inquietudes científicas y su curiosidad inquisitiva por las formas diversas de la cultura configuran la imagen de un europeo que dio testimonio crítico de un momento, de un lugar y de unos personajes imprescindibles para comprender el sentido de nuestro presente. Nos referimos a la Viena de principios del siglo XX, habitada por los pintores
Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele y Oskar Kokoschka, por los arquitectos Josef Hoffmann, Otto Wagner y Adolf Loos, por Sigmund Freud y por Robert Musil; aquella capital de un imperio imposible, reducido desde 1918 a ser solo una referencia en el mapa de la cultura, sin poder efectivo. Se imponía entonces la revisión crítica del exceso de ornamentación que algunos —como Loos o el propio Broch— denunciaron como la sombra de su propio vacío. En registros variados dicha vocación la proseguirían autores como Ludwig Wittgenstein o Thomas Bernhard.

Hermann Broch nació en Viena el 1 de noviembre de 1886, en el seno de una familia judía burguesa, dedicada a la industria textil. Obediente a los deseos de su padre, obtuvo el título de ingeniero industrial y dirigió la empresa familiar hasta 1928, en que la vendió obligado por dificultades financieras y por la voluntad de asumir su vocación literaria. Desde 1908, excepto los dos años de servicio militar, había publicado ensayos críticos, poesías y narraciones, y había empezado a relacionarse con artistas como el músico Alban Berg y escritores como Franz Blei, Franz Werfel, Robert Musil o Elias Canetti, este último encargado en 1936 de pronunciar el discurso en homenaje a su cincuenta cumpleaños. Y fue Canetti quien, pensando en Broch, resumía la grandeza o la función real de todo verdadero escritor en tres exigencias: la entrega a su tiempo, una sed de universalidad capaz de sintetizar su época y, finalmente, la de estar a la vez en su contra. Precisamente por cumplir la tercera, en marzo de 1938 fue encarcelado por motivos políticos; en libertad el día 31, consiguió huir a Inglaterra gracias a la intervención de Edwin y Willa Muir, traductores al inglés de *Los sonámbulos*, y después a Estados Unidos. En 1945 aparecería en edición bilingüe (alemán e inglés) *La muerte de Virgilio*, obra que le consagró universalmente. Broch pasó luego a interesarse por el fenómeno de las masas y su psicología, por el porvenir de un mundo a reconsiderar tras los desastres de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y por las propuestas de una política universal y educativa digna de esa tradición ilustrada europea que los acontecimientos desmentían. Pronunció conferencias y estimuló debates para superar la crisis del humanismo, y vivió modestamente sin materializar su máximo anhelo, el retorno a Europa. El 30 de mayo de 1951 moría en New Haven, Connecticut, dejando una nutrida variedad de escritos que guarda el archivo de la Universidad de Yale.

Pasenow o la caducidad del romanticismo

La fama de Hermann Broch es inseparable de *Los sonámbulos*, obra publicada a sus 45 años (1931-1932), en momentos nada propicios a la recepción de un texto estilísticamente singular. Es la época de la ascensión del nazismo, llena de dificultades para la distribución y recepción serenas de una obra cuya lectura trasciende el mero entretenimiento. El muy leal editor de Broch, Daniel Brody, comprendía la alarma del autor por la difusión de su obra, pero aquellos eran años en los que «el editor propone y Hitler dispone».

La trilogía supone una revisión de los siglos xix y xx a partir de tres fechas significativas: 1888,1903 y 1918. Su andadura narrativa se corresponde con el auge del desarrollo industrial y económico en el cambio de siglo, que en Alemania, al igual que la expansión imperialista, transcurre tras los pasos de Inglaterra y Francia, una influencia que se acusa más, naturalmente, desde la segunda parte. La primera, *Pasenow o el romanticismo*, gira en torno al final de un idealismo entumecido de nostalgias frente a una época que acabará con rituales de honor convencionales y obsoletos. En *Pasenow*, lo romántico —su alargada sombra inútil— resulta ser un refugio frágil y patético ante las circunstancias. Centrada en figuras que encarnan las líneas de tensión ilustrativas del conflicto entre lo viejo y lo nuevo, la narración articula un discurso claro y sucesivo del tiempo evocado y, entre líneas, irónicamente aludido. Pero a la vez supone un diagnóstico de lo inerme en las figuras ancladas en el pasado. Joachim von Pasenow, paciente sufridor de un padre que le condena a un destino prescrito, es su emblema. Frente a él, la figura de Bertrand ilustra el sentido de una independencia emergente. De una parte, el ritual de un honor que constriñe y bloquea las posibilidades mismas de conocerse; de otra, encarnado en Bertrand, el abandono de la carrera militar y el cambio al ámbito de los negocios; en rigor, al trato despierto con el mundo. Pender del destino o intentar construirlo, he aquí el esquema de la dicotomía que el autor plantea respetando el drama interior que transciende al mero contraste de dos talantes distintos ante la sociedad.

El lector advierte el «doblestar» latente en los personajes. El joven Pasenow reprime sus apetencias vitales en beneficio de normas que garanticen su seguridad aunque bloqueen su libre albedrío; Bertrand, afín a los tiempos nuevos, es consciente, sin embargo, de lo aleatorio que es su papel. Aparte de su relieve —reaparece al sesgo y de manera dramática en *Esch o la anarquía*, y sus comentarios transparentan el clima intelectual del autor—, Bertrand desmiente con su escepticismo el lado triunfalista de un positivismo en ciernes y que irá en aumento con el avance de la trilogía. Ese «doblestar» es como un vivir entre dos tiempos, en rigor la encrucijada genérica del sonámbulo y de su indeterminación entre la vigilia y el sueño. Si Pasenow no logra zafarse de las condiciones de clase que le determinan, Bertrand tampoco accede a una idealidad que él compensa, de manera vicaria, con la sutileza de sus conversaciones. Comprende el mundo y ve en los otros aspectos que ellos no saben ni quieren reconocer —como en los diálogos con Joachim o en la impresionante escena con Elizabeth—, pero él también es una suerte de «huésped de su propia vida» (*Ein Gast seines Lebens*) en la precisa y memorable fórmula de Hermann Broch.

A excepción del padre de Joachim von Pasenow, emblema inerte pero aún coactivo del ámbito familiar y social inmediato, los personajes pugnan por dar un sentido a su vida pero, a veces alarmados —Elizabeth —, otras frustrados y recelosos Joachim—, tal empeño les resulta o bien opaco o bien inalcanzable. Así, Joachim querrá dar por terminadas sus frustraciones gracias al orden seguro y fijo, estable, de la carrera militar. Pasenow encarna a un ser vacilante entre la nostalgia y la dependencia y admiración inconfesadas por Bertrand, que le llevan por lo mismo a desconfiar de él. La novela ilustra los imponderables de clase y muestra cómo estos juegan la baza decisiva. Muerto el hermano de Joachim, que dirigía la hacienda familiar, este ha de reemplazarle sin remedio. Así son las cosas, como también es casi una imposición el enamoramiento —el compromiso entre apellidos— entre un Pasenow y una Baddensen.

Escindido entre las figuras de Ruzena, la cabaretera con la que vive un goce sensual auténtico pero inaceptable en la estratificación social que siempre excusará sus deslices, y Elizabeth, sublimación cabal e idealizada a fuer de obligado compromiso, Pasenow encarna una imagen crepuscular, patéticamente sujeta al dictado familiar, en un mundo que agoniza pero aún arrastra el imperativo de unos modales determinados y el culto a una religión que se prolonga y se celebra a sí mismo en los esponsales con Elizabeth.

Si el principio y el fin de la novela responden a la vertiente crítica del autor, su vena poética destaca en instantes privilegiados: el del íntimo diálogo entre Bertrand y Elizabeth ya mencionado, o el de la felicidad erótica de Ruzena y Joachim. Frente a esta dimensión, que Broch estilizará con un virtuosismo consumado en *La muerte de Virgilio*, los ya citados inicio y final de *Pasenow o el romanticismo* anuncian el cambio narrativo que se producirá en el siglo xx en las obras de Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, James Joyce, Franz Kafka o William Faulkner.

La semblanza del padre Von Pasenow —con su bastón semeja un trípode ambulante, perfilado con morosa complacencia— anticipa la intencionalidad crítica subyacente a lo largo del texto. El tiempo pasado aún camina, pero se arrastra con dificultad. Broch apunta el dato de que en ese año, 1888, el señor Von

Pasenow había cumplido sus setenta. Con ello el lector repara en que el arco temporal a asumir desde el texto abarca precisamente un siglo, de 1818 a 1918. La dimensión poética del autor compensa fragmentariamente, con secuencias de intensa sublimación lírica, la prosaica revisión de los fastos decimonónicos, el solipsismo de sus personajes y su hieratismo refractario ante el presente: la vana pretensión, en fin, de subsistir a la realidad por una dramaturgia retroactiva. Tal supuesto, que sublima la incapacidad ante el devenir urgente de nuevos desafíos, supone o implica un refugio; y su metáfora es el romanticismo.

La caduca puesta en escena romántica desemboca en lo que Broch caracteriza como kitsch y que el joven Hofmannsthal, en su madurez escritor de libretos operísticos para Richard Strauss, ya presentía en un folleto de 1893 dedicado a lo «moderno» —Art Noveau o Judgendstil— como época de finos mobiliarios y nervios a flor de piel (a los que Broch añadiría más tarde el vals). A ese tiempo, a su atmósfera de uniformes de gala, de aventurillas secretas y de lujos públicos, es a lo que pasan revista crítica las muy conscientes páginas de la novela. Seguramente su insistencia en desenmascarar el vacío burgués y el indiferente curso de las cosas en tiempos frívolos —que siempre vuelven— fue lo que llevó a Michelangelo Antonioni a «citar» a Broch en su película *La Notte* (1960), donde una divagada Monica Vitti tiene a mano, precisamente, *Los sonámbulos*.

El brevísimo capítulo final de la novela es, como ya se ha dicho, una ilustración perfecta de la vertiente crítica del texto y, en cierto modo, su proyección teórica latente: una concepción de la narrativa como algo obligado a superar su función de mero entretenimiento. El autor da por supuesto que puede ahorrar al lector las sentimentales delicias entre Joachim y Elizabeth. Así, el pacto entre el autor y el lector se enriquece con el beneficio de la ironía.

Los sonámbulos, desde este primer volumen, es un certero diagnóstico sobre el tiempo histórico que recorre la trilogía. En *Pasenow*, la pretensión de algunos de prolongar el romanticismo hasta el cambio de siglo mediante galas, cabalgatas y uniformes gloriosos para un tiempo sin gloria, se presenta como algo obsoleto y kitsch. Algo que Broch liquida con el laconismo terminante de las líneas finales de *Pasenow*.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO

PASENOW O EL ROMANTICISMO

I

En el año 1888 el señor Von Pasenow tenía setenta años y había personas que, al verlo acercarse por las calles de Berlín, experimentaban una extraña e inexplicable sensación de desagrado, y llegaban incluso a afirmar, en su desagrado, que debía tratarse de un viejo malvado. Pequeño pero de correctas proporciones, ni esmirriado, ni gordinflón: estaba muy bien proporcionado, y la chistera con que solía cubrirse en Berlín no resultaba en absoluto ridícula. Llevaba la barba a lo káiser Guillermo I, aunque más corta, y en sus mejillas no se veía rastro de la blanca pelusa que daba al monarca su aspecto campechano; incluso su cabello, casi sin claros, mostraba solo algunas hebras blancas; a pesar de sus setenta años había conservado el rubio de su juventud, aquel rubio rojizo que recuerda la paja enmohecida y que en realidad no sienta bien a un hombre viejo, al que uno prefiere imaginar con cabello más digno. Pero el señor Von Pasenow estaba acostumbrado al color de su cabello, y tampoco el monóculo le parecía en modo alguno demasiado juvenil. Cuando se miraba en el espejo, reconocía de nuevo aquel rostro que ya le miraba desde allí cincuenta años atrás. Y aunque el señor Von Pasenow no estaba en este aspecto descontento de sí mismo, hay no obstante personas a las que les desagrada el aspecto de este anciano y que tampoco comprenden que haya existido una mujer que lo haya mirado con ojos anhelantes, que lo haya abrazado con deseo, y le atribuyen como mucho algunas criadas polacas de su hacienda, a las que se habrá podido acercar con esta agresividad algo histérica y sin embargo imperiosa que es a menudo propia de los hombres bajitos. Fuera esto cierto o no, era en cualquier caso la opinión de sus dos hijos, y se comprende que él no la haya compartido. La opinión de los hijos es, por otra parte, con frecuencia subjetiva, y sería fácil acusarlos de injusticia y parcialidad, pese a la sensación un poco desagradable que uno mismo experimentaba al ver al señor Von Pasenow, un raro desagrado que va todavía en aumento cuando el señor Von Pasenow ha pasado ya y uno lo sigue casualmente con la mirada. Quizá se debe a que entonces resulta completamente incierta la edad de este hombre, porque no se mueve de un modo senil, ni como un joven, ni como un hombre en la plenitud de la vida. Y dado que la incertidumbre engendra desagrado, no es imposible que alguno de los transeúntes considere indecorosa esta forma de moverse, y tampoco es extraño que la califique después de arrogante y vulgar, de levemente bravucona y pretenciosamente correcta. Es, claro está, cuestión de temperamento; pero uno puede imaginar fácilmente que un joven cegado por el odio sienta deseos de retroceder a toda prisa para meterle al hombre que anda así un bastón entre las piernas, hacerlo caer de algún modo, romperle las piernas, para destruir para siempre esta forma de andar. Pero él camina a pasos rápidos y en línea recta, lleva la cabeza alta, como suelen llevarla los hombres bajos, y, como también él se mantiene muy erguido, saca un poco la barriguita, casi podría decirse que la lleva ante él, y que con ella transporta a toda su persona hacia alguna parte, un feo regalo que nadie desea. Solo que, dado que con una comparación no se aclara todavía nada, estos insultos quedan sin fundamento, y quizá uno se avergüenza de ellos, hasta que descubre el bastón junto a las piernas. El bastón avanza rítmicamente, se eleva casi hasta la altura de las rodillas, se detiene en el suelo con un golpecito seco y vuelve a elevarse, y los pies andan a su lado. Y también estos se elevan más de lo normal, la punta del pie se adelanta un poco más de lo debido, como si quisiera en su desprecio por los que vienen en dirección contraria mostrarles la suela del zapato, y el tacón se clava en el asfalto con un golpecito seco. Así avanzan piernas y bastón unas junto al otro, y así surge la idea de que ese hombre, si hubiera nacido caballo, se habría convertido en caballo de andadura; pero lo más horrible y desagradable de todo esto es que se trata de un modo de andar sobre tres piernas, un trípode que se ha puesto en movimiento. Y es terrible la idea de que ese andar voluntarioso sobre tres piernas tiene que ser tan falso como esa rectilineidad y ese avanzar impetuoso: ¡dirigido a la nada! Porque nadie que se proponga algo serio anda de este modo, y aunque uno piensa forzosamente durante unos segundos en un usurero que se dirige a las casas de los pobres para el cobro implacable de las deudas, advierte enseguida que esta imagen es demasiado pobre y demasiado terrena, horrorizado al descubrir que así renquea el diablo, un perro, que cojea sobre tres patas, al descubrir que es una forma rectilínea de andar en zigzag… basta; todo esto se le puede ocurrir a uno, si analiza el paso del señor Von Pasenow con amoroso odio. Pero en definitiva puede intentarse lo mismo con la mayoría de los hombres. Siempre se encuentra algo. Y aunque el señor Von Pasenow no llevaba una vida agitada, sino que por el contrario

dedicaba mucho tiempo al cumplimiento de obligaciones decorativas y similares, como corresponde a una fortuna sólida y segura, sin embargo —y esto respondía también a su modo de ser— estaba siempre ocupado, y no era propio de él andar vagabundeando. Y si venía dos veces al año a Berlín, tenía mucho que hacer. Ahora se dirigía a casa de su hijo menor, el primer teniente Joachim von Pasenow.

Siempre que Joachim von Pasenow se encontraba con su padre, acudían a su mente recuerdos de juventud, fenómeno muy lógico, pero sobre todo volvía a revivir los acontecimientos que habían rodeado su ingreso en la academia de cadetes de Culm. En realidad eran solo retazos de recuerdos, que emergían fugazmente, y mezclaban en desorden lo importante y lo banal. Así, es completamente tonto y banal mencionar al administrador Jan, cuya imagen, aunque era una figura secundaria, sobresalía entre todas las otras imágenes. Esto puede deberse a que Jan no era en realidad un hombre, sino una barba. Uno podía contemplarlo horas enteras y preguntarse si tras el desgreñado paisaje de maleza impenetrable, aunque suave, habitaba un ser humano. Ni siquiera cuando Jan hablaba —aunque no hablaba mucho— estaba uno seguro, porque las palabras emergían detrás de la barba como detrás de un telón, y lo mismo hubiera podido ser otro el que las pronunciara. El momento más emocionante se producía cuando Jan bostezaba: entonces la superficie peluda se entreabría en un punto determinado, y se hacía evidente que este era también el punto al que Jan solía dirigir los alimentos. Cuando Joachim corrió hacia él para contarle que iba a ingresar muy pronto en la academia de cadetes, Jan estaba precisamente comiendo; estaba sentado allí, cortaba dados de pan y escuchaba en silencio. Finalmente dijo: «¿Y está contento el señorito?». Y entonces Joachim se dio cuenta de que no estaba contento en absoluto; hasta tenía ganas de llorar, pero como no había causa inmediata para ello, se limitó a asentir con la cabeza y a decir que sí estaba contento.

Y estaba también la Cruz de Hierro, que colgaba en el gran salón, enmarcada tras un cristal. Procedía de un Pasenow que en el año 13 se había mantenido en su puesto de mando. Puesto que colgaba sin más de la pared, resultaba un poco incomprensible que se armara tanto revuelo cuando le concedieron también una al tío Bernhard. Joachim se avergonzaba todavía hoy de haber podido ser tan tonto en aquel entonces. Pero quizá en aquel entonces se sintió únicamente enojado, porque pretendían hacerle más sugestiva la academia de cadetes con el señuelo de la Cruz de Hierro. De todos modos, su hermano Helmuth hubiera sido más apropiado para la academia, y a pesar del largo tiempo transcurrido desde entonces, Joachim consideraba ridicula la disposición por la cual el primogénito se tenía que hacer agricultor, y el más joven se tenía que hacer oficial. A él la Cruz de Hierro le era indiferente, mientras que Helmuth ardió de entusiasmo cuando el tío Bernhard participó con la División Goeben en el asalto de Kissingen. Además ni siquiera era un tío auténtico, sino un primo de su padre.

La madre era más alta que el padre, y en la hacienda todo se regía por ella. Era curioso que ni Helmuth ni él quisieran hacerle ningún caso; en realidad esto era algo que tenían en común con su padre. No prestaban oídos a su pertinaz y débil «¡Eso no!», y no hacían más que enfadarse cuando ella añadía: «Ya podéis tener cuidado de que vuestro padre no os descubra». Y no se asustaban cuando ella echaba mano a su último recurso: «Ahora sí que se lo diré a vuestro padre», y tampoco se asustaban apenas cuando de veras lo hacía, porque entonces el padre se limitaba a lanzarles una mirada de enojo y seguía con pasos enérgicos y rectilíneos su camino. Era como un justo castigo para la madre, por haber intentado aliarse con el enemigo común.

Por aquel entonces todavía estaba en funciones el antecesor del pastor actual. Tenía unas patillas blanco-amarillentas que apenas se diferenciaban del color de la piel, y cuando se sentaba a la mesa los días de fiesta, solía comparar a la madre con la reina Luisa en medio de sus múltiples hijos. Resultaba un poco ridículo, pero no obstante uno se sentía orgulloso. Después el pastor adquirió la nueva costumbre de poner una mano sobre la cabeza de Joachim y llamarle «joven guerrero», porque todos, incluida la criada polaca que servía en la cocina, hablaban ya de la academia de cadetes de Culm. Sin embargo, Joachim seguía esperando que se tomara una decisión correcta. La madre había dicho una vez en la mesa que no veía la necesidad de desprenderse de Joachim; podía ingresar más tarde como aspirante; así había sido desde siempre y así se había mantenido. Pero el tío Bernhard había opinado que el nuevo ejército necesitaba gente capacitada, y que Culm podía gustarle a un joven como Dios manda. El padre había guardado un silencio desagradable, como siempre que hablaba la madre. Sencillamente no la escuchaba. Solo el día del cumpleaños de la madre, al entrechocar con la suya su copa, recogía la comparación del pastor y la llamaba su reina Luisa. Quizá la madre estuviera realmente en contra de su ingreso en Culm, pero no se podía contar con ella, porque en definitiva formaba partido con el padre.

La madre era muy puntual. Nunca estaba ausente del establo cuando llegaba la hora de ordeñar, ni del gallinero cuando se trataba de recoger los huevos; por las mañanas se la podía encontrar en la cocina y por las tardes en el lavadero, donde contaba con las criadas las rígidas prendas de la colada. Fue entonces cuando por primera vez lo supo realmente. Había estado con la madre en el establo de las vacas, su nariz estaba todavía llena del denso olor del establo, cuando salieron al frío aire invernal; el tío Bernhard cruzó el patio para acudir a su encuentro. El tío Bernhard seguía llevando bastón, después de una herida se podía

llevar bastón, todos los convalecientes llevaban bastón, aunque ya no cojearan apenas. La madre se había detenido, y Joachim se asió con fuerza al bastón del tío Bernhard. Todavía hoy recordaba claramente el puño de marfil adornado con un escudo. El tío Bernhard dijo: «Felicíteme, prima, acabo de ser nombrado mayor». Joachim levantó la mirada hacia el mayor; era incluso más alto que la madre, se había echado ligeramente hacia atrás en un gesto que parecía orgulloso y no obstante era reglamentario, y parecía más caballeroso y más fuerte que de costumbre, y quizá había aumentado incluso de estatura; en cualquier caso hacía mejor pareja con ella que el padre. Llevaba una barba corta y tupida, pero podía vérsele la boca. Joachim se preguntó si sería un gran honor poder sostener el bastón de un mayor, y decidió sentirse un poco orgulloso. «Así es», siguió diciendo el tío Bernhard, «pero ahora los hermosos días de Stolpin tocan de nuevo a su fin.» La madre dijo que esto era a la vez una buena y una mala noticia, una respuesta complicada que Joachim no acabó de entender. Estaban de pie en la nieve; la madre llevaba su chaqueta de piel marrón, que era tan suave como ella misma, y bajo su gorro de piel asomaban sus cabellos rubios. Joachim se había alegrado siempre de tener el mismo pelo rubio de la madre; también llegaría a ser más alto que el padre, quizá tan alto como el tío Bernhard, y cuando este se dirigió a él diciendo: «Ahora seremos pronto camaradas en el uniforme del rey», por unos instantes estuvo completamente de acuerdo. Pero como la madre se limitó a suspirar y no hizo la menor objeción, él se resignó, lo mismo que si estuviera en presencia del padre, soltó el bastón y se fue a ver a Jan.

Con Helmuth era imposible hablar del asunto; Helmuth le envidiaba y hablaba como los adultos, que decían todos que un futuro soldado tenía que estar contento y orgulloso. Jan era el único que no era un hipócrita ni un traidor; solo había preguntado si el señorito estaba contento, y no parecía creer en esta posibilidad. Naturalmente los demás y también Helmuth obraban de buena fe, solo querían consolarlo. Joachim no había concienciado nunca que en aquel entonces había estado secretamente convencido de la hipocresía y de la traición de Helmuth; inmediatamente había querido arreglar las cosas y le había regalado todos sus juguetes, aunque de todos modos no los hubiera podido llevar consigo a la academia de cadetes, y esto no era ninguna disculpa. También le había regalado la mitad del poni, que pertenecía a medias a los muchachos, de modo que Helmuth poseía ahora un caballo entero. Aquellas semanas fueron una época aciaga y sin embargo feliz; nunca, ni antes ni después, había sido tan amigo de su hermano. Pero después ocurrió la desgracia con el poni: Helmuth había renunciado durante aquellos días a sus nuevos derechos sobe el poni, y Joachim podía disponer del poni a su antojo. Desde luego no era una renuncia demasiado importante, porque en aquellas semanas el suelo estaba blando y hundido, y había una estricta prohibición que impedía cabalgar por los campos con este suelo. Pero Joachim disfrutaba los derechos de los que abandonan un lugar, y como además Helmuth estaba de acuerdo, salió a caballo con el pretexto de que el poni hiciera un poco de ejercicio fuera, en el campo. Había iniciado apenas un ligero galope, cuando ocurrió la desgracia: el poni metió una pata delantera en un hoyo muy profundo, cayó y no pudo volver a levantarse. Helmuth acudió corriendo, después acudió también el cochero. El poni yacía allí, la hirsuta cabeza apoyada sobre un terrón, y la lengua le colgaba a un lado del hocico. Joachim vio todavía cómo él y Helmuth se arrodillaban junto al animal y le acariciaban la cabeza, pero no podía recordar cómo habían vuelto a la casa, solo sabía que estaba de pie en la cocina, en la que de pronto se había hecho el silencio, y que todos los ojos estaban fijos en él y lo miraban como si fuese un criminal. Después oyó la voz de la madre: «Hay que decírselo a tu padre». Y de pronto se encontró en el cuarto de trabajo del padre, y era como si el tribunal de castigo, que la madre había evocado tantas veces con la odiosa frase, estuviera por fin reunido y congregado y fuera a arremeter contra él. Pero no sucedió nada. El padre se limitó a caminar silencioso y en línea recta de un lado a otro de la habitación, y Joachim intentaba mantenerse firme, contemplaba las astas que colgaban de la pared. Como seguía sin pasar nada, su mirada empezó a divagar y quedó prendida en la arenilla azul de la chorrera de papel de la escupidera hexagonal, barnizada de marrón, junto a la estufa. Casi había olvidado por qué había acudido él allí; solo que la habitación parecía más grande que de costumbre, y sentía en el pecho un peso helado. Finalmente el padre se colocó el monóculo: «Ha llegado el momento de que salgas de esta casa», y entonces Joachirti supo que todos lo habían engañado, incluso Helmuth, y en aquel momento hasta le pareció justo que el poni se hubiera roto la pata, y también la madre lo había difamado insistentemente para que él saliera de aquella casa. Entonces vio todavía que el padre sacaba la pistola de la caja. Y entonces vomitó. Al día siguiente supo por el médico que había sufrido una conmoción cerebral, y se sintió orgulloso de ello. Helmuth estaba sentado junto a su cama, y aunque Joachim sabía que el padre había matado al poni de un disparo, no dijeron ni una palabra al respecto, y fue de nuevo una época feliz, extrañamente protegidos y aislados de los demás seres humanos. Sin embargo, tocó a su fin, y con un retraso de algunas semanas fue enviado a la academia de Culm. Pero al encontrarse ante su estrecha cama, tan remota y tan distante de su cama de enfermo de Stolpin, casi le pareció que se había llevado consigo aquel aislamiento, y aquello fue lo primero que le hizo soportable su estancia allí.

Naturalmente en aquel tiempo ocurrieron muchas otras cosas que él había olvidado, pero no obstante había quedado un residuo inquietante, y en sus sueños creía algunas veces hablar polaco. Cuando llegó a

primer teniente, regaló a Helmuth un caballo que él mismo había montado durante largo tiempo. Sin embargo, no le abandonaba la sensación de que le seguía debiendo algo, como si Helmuth fuera un incómodo acreedor. Todo aquello carecía de sentido, y solo raras veces pensaba en ello. Lo revivía únicamente cuando el padre venía a Berlín; y, cuando él preguntaba por la madre y por Helmuth, no olvidaba nunca informarse también de cómo estaba el caballo.

Cuando Joachim von Pasenow se hubo puesto su ropa de civil y su barbilla se movió con desacostumbrada libertad entre las dos puntas del cuello entreabierto, cuando se hubo puesto la reluciente chistera y hubo cogido un bastón con puntiagudo puño de marfil, de camino ahora hacia el hotel, para recoger a su padre para el obligado recorrido nocturno, surgió de pronto ante él la imagen de Eduard von Bertrand, y le resultó agradable que la ropa de civil no le sentara a él con la misma naturalidad que a aquel hombre, al que en secreto calificaba a veces de traidor. Por desgracia era previsible y de temer que encontraría a Bertrand en los locales mundanos que aquella noche tenía que recorrer con su padre, y ya durante la representación del Wintergarten lo buscó con la mirada, y daba vueltas a la idea de si debía o no presentar un hombre así a su padre.

El problema seguía preocupándole, mientras se dirigían en un coche de punto por la Friedrichstrasse hacia el Jágerkasino. Se sentaban erguidos, los bastones entre las rodillas, mudos sobre los asientos de agrietado cuero negro, y cuando alguna de las chicas que encontraban a su paso les gritaba algo, Joachim von Pasenow mantenía la mirada fija al frente, mientras que su padre, fijo el monóculo, decía «¡Qué locura!». Sí, desde que el señor Von Pasenow vino a Berlín, habían cambiado muchas cosas, y aunque se aceptara así, uno no podía dejar de advertir que la nueva política reformista del fundador del Reich había producido brotes sumamente desagradables. El señor Von Pasenow dijo lo mismo que decía todos los años: «En París no puede ser peor», y todavía aumentó su disgusto que una hilera de deslumbrantes luces de gas atrajera la atención de los transeúntes hacia la entrada del Jágerkasino, ante la cual se detuvieron.

Una estrecha escalera de madera llevaba al primer piso, donde se encontraban los salones, y el señor Von Pasenow la subió con la rectilínea acometividad que le era propia. Una muchacha de cabello negro descendía la escalera, se apretó contra la pared en un rellano, para dejar paso a los visitantes, y, como evidentemente la hizo reír el ímpetu del anciano, Joachim tuvo un gesto de disculpa y confusión. Una vez más tuvo que imaginar a Bertrand, ya como el amante de esta muchacha, ya como su rufián o en cualquier otra función fantástica, y, apenas estuvieron en la sala, lo buscó con la vista a su alrededor. Pero naturalmente Bertrand no estaba allí, y sí estaban dos caballeros del regimiento, y Joachim cayó entonces por primera vez en la cuenta de que él mismo los había animado a acudir al casino, para no tener que estar con su padre a solas o, todavía peor, con Bertrand.

El señor Von Pasenow, de acuerdo con su edad y rango, fue saludado como un superior con breves y rígidas inclinaciones y entrechocar de tacones, y al igual que un general en funciones preguntó si los señores se divertían; si los señores querían beber con él una copa de champán, lo consideraría un honor, a lo cual los señores dieron su asentimiento con un nuevo movimiento de los pies. Trajeron champán frío. Los señores se mantenían tiesos y callados en sus sillas, brindaban en silencio y observaban la sala, la ornamentación blanca y dorada, las llamas de gas que, envueltas por el humo del tabaco, zumbaban en el gran círculo de las lámparas, y observaban a las parejas de bailarines que giraban en el centro del salón. Finalmente el señor Yon Pasenow: «Bien, señores, ¡espero que por mi causa no hayan renunciado ustedes a los dulces encantos femeninos!» —inclinaciones y sonrisas— «hay aquí muchachas deliciosas; cuando yo subía, me crucé con una preciosidad, de cabellos negros y con unos ojos que a ustedes, los jóvenes, no les pueden dejar indiferentes.» Joachim von Pasenow sintió tal vergüenza que hubiera querido apretar la garganta del viejo para atajar aquel exultante discurso, pero uno de los camaradas contestaba ya que evidentemente se trataba de Ruzena, muchacha en verdad excepcionalmente hermosa, a la que no podía negársele tampoco cierta distinción, aunque las damas presentes no eran en su mayoría lo que parecían, porque la dirección llevaba a cabo una selección muy rigurosa y cuidaba mucho su buen tono. Pero entretanto Ruzena había vuelto a aparecer en el salón: venía del brazo de una muchacha rubia, y, mientras deambulaban por mesas y palcos con sus esbeltos talles y su donaire, tenían realmente un aspecto distinguido. Cuando cruzaron junto a la mesa de Pasenow, alguien preguntó en broma si a la señorita Ruzena no le habían silbado hacía un momento los oídos, y el señor Von Pasenow añadió que, a juzgar por el nombre, tenía ante sí a una hermosa polaca, o sea, a casi una compatriota. No, no era polaca, dijo Ruzena, sino bohemia, aquí se decía checa, pero bohemia era más correcto, porque también el país se llamaba en realidad Bohemia. «Tanto mejor», dijo el señor Von Pasenow, «los polacos no sirven para nada… no se puede confiar en ellos… bueno, qué más da.»

Entretanto las dos muchachas se habían sentado, y Ruzena hablaba con voz profunda y se reía de sí misma por no haber aprendido todavía alemán. Joachim estaba irritado porque el viejo había evocado el recuerdo de las polacas, pero también él tuvo que pensar en una segadora que lo había subido al carro junto a las gavillas cuando era un chiquillo. Pero aunque esta muchacha confundía todos los artículos con su

acento gutural y hablaba de «la director» y «el ciudad», era sin embargo toda una damita, que en tieso corsé y perfecta compostura se llevaba la copa de champán a los labios, y era algo muy distinto a una segadora polaca; fueran o no verdad los rumores sobre el padre y las criadas. Joachim no tenía arte ni parte en el asunto, pero con esta delicada muchacha el viejo no debía atreverse a proceder de la forma que quizá le era habitual. Sin embargo, la vida de una muchacha bohemia no podía ser imaginada muy distinta a la de las polacas —como parecía también imposible imaginar algo vivo detrás de la marioneta móvil de un civil alemán—, y aunque intentaba imaginar en torno a Ruzena una buena vivienda, una buena madre matronil, un buen pretendiente con guantes, había algo que no encajaba, y Joachim no podía liberarse de la sensación de que allí todo debía ocurrir de forma salvaje, humillante y brutal: Ruzena le daba pena, aunque sin duda hay algo en ella de un animalito agazapado y salvaje, en cuya garganta se esconde el oscuro grito, oscuro como los bosques de Bohemia, y a él le hubiera gustado saber si se podía hablar con ella como con una dama, porque todo esto es terrible y sin embargo atrayente y en cierto modo da la razón al padre y a sus sucias intenciones. Joachim teme que también Ruzena pueda advertir esto y busca la respuesta en su rostro; ella se da cuenta y le sonríe, aunque su mano, que cuelga blandamente del borde de la mesa, se deja acariciar por el viejo, y él lo hace abiertamente e intenta echar mano de sus conocimientos del polaco para erigir así un seto lingüístico alrededor de la chica y de sí mismo. Desde luego ella no debería permitirlo, y cuando en Stolpin decían que las muchachas polacas no eran de fiar tal vez tuvieran razón. Pero quizá ella es únicamente demasiado débil, y el honor exigiría que se la protegiera del viejo. Esta sería en realidad la misión de su amante; si Bertrand tuviera un ápice de caballerosidad, tendría la obligación de aparecer por fin, para poner con tacto las cosas en su sitio. Súbitamente Joachim empieza a hablar de Bertrand con los compañeros, si hace mucho que no saben de él, qué es lo que hace ahora, sí, Eduard von Bertrand es un hombre extraordinariamente reservado. Pero los compañeros han bebido mucho champán, dan respuestas absurdas y ya no se asombran de nada, ni siquiera de la obstinación con que Joachim insiste en el tema Bertrand, y aunque intencionadamente repite el nombre una y otra vez en voz muy alta y clara, las dos muchachas ni siquiera pestañean, y surge en él la sospecha de que Bertrand puede haber caído tan bajo que se le conozca allí por un nombre falso; así pues se dirige directamente a Ruzena, si ella no conoce a Von Bertrand… hasta que el viejo, fino el oído y clara la cabeza a pesar de todos los champanes, pregunta qué demonios se propone ahora Joachim con el tal Bertrand: «Lo estás buscando como si se hubiera escondido aquí». Joachim lo niega y se ruboriza, pero el viejo sigue con su parloteo: sí, él conocía bien al padre, el viejo coronel Von Bertrand, que ya ha dejado este mundo, y es muy posible que fuera el tal Eduard quien lo llevara a la tumba. Había tomado muy a pecho, se decía, que el tunante hubiera salido de la academia sin que nadie supiera el porqué ni si tras todo aquello se escondía algo sucio. Joachim se sublevó: «Usted perdone, se trata de calumnias sin fundamento… y lo último que puede decirse de Bertrand es que sea un tunante». «Calma», dice el viejo y se vuelve otra vez hacia la mano de Ruzena, en la que deposita ahora un largo beso; Ruzena le deja hacer con indiferencia y observa a Joachim, cuyo cabello claro y suave le recuerda a los niños de la escuela de su tierra natal. «No quiero adular a usted», silabea en su pésimo alemán dirigiéndose al viejo, «pero amable cabello tiene su hijo», después coge la cabeza de su amiga, la mantiene junto a la de Joachim y queda encantada de que el color de pelo coincida: «Hermosa pareja harían», explica a las dos cabezas, y les pasa a los dos los dedos por el pelo. La muchacha lanza un chillido, porque le está estropeando el peinado, Joachim siente la suave mano sobre la nuca, experimenta una ligera sensación de vértigo y echa la cabeza hacia atrás, como si quisiera atrapar la mano entre la cabeza y la nuca para obligarla a quedarse allí, pero la mano desciende ya por sí misma nuca abajo, en una rápida y delicada caricia. «Calma, calma», oye de nuevo la seca voz del padre, y después ve que saca la cartera, extrae de ella dos grandes billetes y los desliza con disimulo hacia las chicas. Sí, también el viejo, cuando está de buen humor, les lanza monedas a las segadoras, y aunque Joachim quisiera intervenir, no puede evitar que Ruzena coja decidida los cincuenta marcos y se los guarde muy contenta: «Gracias, papá», dice, «papá político», se corrige, y le guiña un ojo a Joachim. Joachim está lívido de ira; ¿va a comprarle el viejo una chica por cincuenta marcos? El anciano, perspicaz, advierte el desliz de Ruzena y subraya: «Bueno, me parece que a ti te gusta mi chiquillo…, por mi bendición no quedará…». Perro, piensa Joachim. Pero el viejo domina ahora la situación: «Ruzena, hermosa niña, mañana iré a verte para pedir tu mano, como corresponde, con todos los honores; qué debo llevarte como regalo de bodas… pero tienes que decirme dónde está tu palacio…». Joachim desvía la mirada, como aquel que en una ejecución no quiere ver caer el hacha, pero Ruzena se pone rígida de pronto, se le nublan los ojos, sus labios se contraen desamparados, rechaza la mano que se tiende hacia ella en un gesto de ayuda o de caricia, y se aleja corriendo, para acabar desahogándose llorando con la mujer de los lavabos.

«Es igual», dijo el señor Von Pasenow, «pero se ha hecho tarde. Me parece que nos vamos, señores.» En el coche de punto padre e hijo se sentaron uno junto a otro, rígidos, los bastones entre las rodillas, enemigos. Por fin el viejo dijo: «Los cincuenta marcos se los ha quedado, claro. Así era fácil marcharse». Miserable, piensa Joachim.

Sobre el tema del uniforme Bertrand hubiera podido decir: Primeramente era solo la Iglesia la que tronaba como juez sobre los hombres, y todo hombre sabía que era un pecador. Ahora el pecador tiene que juzgar a los pecadores, para que todos los valores no caigan en la anarquía, y, en lugar de llorar con él, el hermano tiene que decir al hermano: «Has obrado mal». Y si antes era solo la indumentaria del clérigo la que se distinguía de las demás como algo extrahumano, si entonces lo civil se traicionaba incluso bajo el uniforme o el traje oficial, más tarde, al perderse la gran intransigencia de la fe, el atuendo terrenal tuvo que ocupar el lugar del celeste, y la sociedad tuvo que dividirse en jerarquías y uniformes terrestres y elevar estos al absoluto en lugar de la fe. Y, como siempre es romántico elevar lo terrenal a lo absoluto, he aquí que el romanticismo estricto y verdadero de esta época es el romanticismo del uniforme, igual que si existiera una idea ultraterrestre y ultratemporal del uniforme, una idea que no existe y que sin embargo es tan poderosa que arrastra con más fuerza a los hombres que cualquier otra ocupación terrenal, una idea inexistente y sin embargo tan poderosa que convierte el uniformado en un poseso del uniforme, pero nunca en un profesional como lo entienden los civiles, quizá precisamente porque el hombre que lleva el uniforme está imbuido hasta las cejas del convencimiento de que está consumando la forma de vida propia de su tiempo y también con ello la seguridad de su propia vida.

Así hubiera podido hablar Bertrand; pero desde luego, aunque todo hombre que lleva uniforme no sea consciente de esto, es sin embargo cierto que todo aquel que lleva uniforme durante años encuentra en este un mejor orden de cosas que el hombre que solo cambia su traje civil de noche por el de día. Desde luego no tiene necesidad alguna de reflexionar sobre estas cosas, porque un auténtico uniforme proporciona al que lo lleva una delimitación muy clara entre su persona y el mundo circundante; es como una rígida funda, en la que mundo y persona chocan viva y claramente entre sí y se distinguen uno de otra; la verdadera misión del uniforme es mostrar y establecer un orden en el mundo y rescatar lo que tiene la vida de fugitivo y efímero, al igual que esconde lo que tiene de blando y fugitivo el cuerpo del hombre, cubre su ropa interior, su piel, y el centinela de guardia tiene que ponerse guantes blancos. De este modo, al hombre que por la mañana se ha abrochado su uniforme hasta el último botón se le da realmente una segunda y más densa piel, como si regresara a su vida más propia y más verdadera. Encerrado en su rígida funda, apresado entre correas y hebillas, empieza a olvidar su propia ropa interior y la inseguridad de la vida, la vida misma se aleja. Cuando ha dado un tirón al borde de la chaqueta del uniforme, para mantenerlo terso y sin arrugas en pecho y espalda, entonces incluso el hijo, al que este hombre sin embargo ama, incluso la mujer, en cuyo abrazo ha engendrado él este hijo, se pierden en una lejanía tan remota y civil que apenas reconoce la boca que ella le ofrece al despedirle, y su hogar se le vuelve extraño, un lugar que no puede visitar cuando va de uniforme. Mientras se dirige al cuartel o al despacho con su uniforme, no se debe a orgullo el hecho de que ignore a los que visten de otro modo; sencillamente, es ya incapaz de comprender que bajo los otros bárbaros atuendos pueda palpitar algo que tenga el menor rasgo en común con lo auténticamente humano, tal como él lo siente en sí. Pero sin embargo el hombre con uniforme no se ha vuelto ciego ni está tampoco lleno de ciegos prejuicios, como con tanta frecuencia se cree; sigue siendo un hombre como tú o como yo, piensa en comer y en acostarse, y lee el periódico durante el desayuno; pero ya no está ligado a las cosas y, como ahora apenas si le importan, puede clasificarlas en buenas y en malas, pues la seguridad de la vida se basa en la intransigencia y en la incomprensión.

Cada vez que Joachim von Pasenow se veía obligado a vestir de civil, acudía a su mente la imagen de Eduard von Bertrand, y cada vez se alegraba de que la ropa de civil no le sentara a él con la misma naturalidad que a aquel hombre, y cada vez se decía a sí mismo que le hubiera gustado saber qué pensaba Bertrand de la cuestión del uniforme. Porque Eduard von Bertrand tenía desde luego sobradas razones para meditar sobre el problema, puesto que de una vez por todas había abandonado el uniforme y se había decidido por el traje civil. Había sido todo muy extraño. Bertrand había terminado sus estudios en la academia de cadetes de Culm dos años antes que Pasenow y allí no se había diferenciado en nada de los demás: llevaba en verano pantalones anchos y blancos como los demás: comía con los demás en una misma mesa, había pasado exámenes como los demás y sin embargo, cuando fue ascendido a segundo teniente, ocurrió lo inconcebible: sin motivo aparente abandonó el ejército y desapareció en una vida insólita, desapareció en las tinieblas de la gran ciudad, unas tinieblas de las que solo emergía de vez en cuando. Cuando uno lo encontraba por la calle, tenía siempre la duda de si debía saludarlo o no, porque a la sensación de hallarse frente a un traidor, que se había apoderado de algo que era propiedad común de todos ellos y lo había llevado al otro lado de la vida, abandonándolo, se mezclaba la sensación de estar expuesto allí, vergonzoso y desnudo, mientras el propio Bertrand no revelaba nada de sus motivos ni de su vida y mantenía siempre la misma afable reserva. Pero quizá lo inquietante radicaba solo en el traje civil de Bertrand, entre cuyas solapas asomaba la blanca pechera almidonada, de modo que en definitiva uno debía avergonzarse por él. Y sin embargo el propio Bertrand había afirmado en Culm que un auténtico soldado no puede permitir que los puños de la camisa asomen fuera de las mangas, porque el nacer, dormir, amar, morir, en resumen todo lo civil, es un asunto de ropa interior; y aunque estas paradojas habían sido características de Bertrand, al igual que el leve gesto de la mano con que indolente y despectivo se

desentendía de lo que había dicho, era sin embargo evidente que ya en aquel entonces ocupaba su mente el problema del uniforme. En lo referente a la ropa interior y a los puños llevaba algo de razón, si uno se paraba a considerar —siempre despertaba Bertrand ese tipo de ideas desagradables— que todos los hombres, sin excluir a los civiles ni a su propio padre, llevaban la camisa metida en el pantalón. Por esta razón a Joachim tampoco le gustaba encontrar en la sala de la tropa a hombres con la chaqueta abierta; había en ello algo indecoroso que, por caminos no muy claros pero sí comprensibles, llevaba a la prescripción de que la visita a determinados locales y otras situaciones eróticas exigían el traje civil, e incluso parecía una falta contra la prescripción el hecho de que hubiera oficiales y suboficiales casados. Cuando el sargento primero, hombre casado, se presentaba al servicio de la mañana y se desabrochaba dos botones de la guerrera para sacar de la abertura, por la que se veía la camisa a cuadros, el gran libro de cuero rojo, Joachim se tocaba casi siempre los botones de su propia chaqueta y solo se sentía seguro después de comprobar que estaban todos abrochados. Casi hubiera deseado que el uniforme fuera una directa emanación de la piel, y a veces pensaba incluso que esta era la verdadera misión de un uniforme, o que por lo menos la ropa interior debería convertirse mediante marcas y distintivos en parte del uniforme. Era inquietante que cada uno llevara consigo, debajo de la chaqueta, la anarquía común a todos. Quizá el mundo se hubiera dislocado por completo, si no se hubiera inventado en el último instante, para los civiles, la ropa almidonada, que convierte la camisa en una tabla blanca y le quita parecido con la ropa interior. Joachim recordaba el asombro que sintió de niño al descubrir en el retrato del abuelo que este no llevaba una camisa almidonada sino una pechera de encajes. Indudablemente los hombres poseían en aquel entonces una íntima y profunda fe cristiana y no tenían que buscar en otra parte protección contra la anarquía. Todas estas reflexiones eran desde luego absurdas y seguramente eran solo resultado de las disparatadas afirmaciones de un tipo como Bertrand; Pasenow casi se avergonzaba de estas ideas ante el sargento, y cuando lo acosaban, intentaba rechazarlas y adoptaba con gesto nervioso una firme posición reglamentaria.

Pero por más que rechazase estos pensamientos como absurdos y aceptase el uniforme como algo natural, se escondía detrás de todo esto algo más que una simple cuestión de indumentaria, algo más que aquello que daba a su vida, si no un contenido, sí una actitud. A menudo creía poder liberarse de este problema y del propio Bertrand con la fórmula «camaradas en el uniforme del rey», aunque estaba muy lejos de querer manifestar con ello un respeto fuera de lo común por el uniforme del rey o de entregarse a una especial vanidad, incluso pensaba que su elegancia no iba más allá ni se diferenciaba de una corrección estrictamente reglamentaria, y no le disgustó oír una vez, en un círculo de damas, la fundamentada idea de que el largo y rígido corte del uniforme y los colores chillones de la tela no cuadraban bien con su rostro, y que una chaqueta de terciopelo marrón, a lo artista, y una corbata suelta le sentarían mucho mejor. Que para él el uniforme significaba, sin embargo, mucho más, puede explicarse en parte por la tenacidad heredada de su madre, que solía adherirse obstinadamente a las costumbres adquiridas. Y a veces le parecía que no podía haber para él ninguna otra actitud, aunque continuaba alimentando un profundo rencor contra la madre, que en aquel entonces se había sometido a las disposiciones del tío Bernhard sin replicar. Pero aquello quedaba muy lejos, y cuando uno se habitúa a vestir uniforme desde los diez años, el traje que lleva crece con él como una camisa de Nessus, y nadie, y menos aún Joachim von Pasenow, es capaz de precisar dónde está el límite entre su yo y el uniforme. Y, sin embargo, era más que una costumbre. Pues, aunque la profesión militar no hubiera crecido dentro de él, o él en ella, el uniforme había llegado a ser para él símbolo de muchas cosas; y a lo largo de los años lo había alimentado y revestido con tantas ideas que, protegido y encerrado allí, ya no habría podido prescindir de él, aislado frente al mundo y la casa paterna, conformándose con esta seguridad y protección, sin notar casi que el uniforme solo le dejaba una estrecha franja de libertad personal y humana, no más ancha que la estrecha franja de puño almidonado que permite el uniforme a los oficiales. No le gustaba vestirse de civil y le parecía bien que el uniforme le mantuviera apartado de locales de mala nota, en los que imaginaba al civil Bertrand acompañado de mujeres disolutas. Porque a menudo lo invadía un miedo terrible a caer también él en el oscuro destino de Bertrand. Por eso censuraba igualmente a su padre, por tener que acompañarlo, y precisamente de civil, en el obligado recorrido por la vida nocturna de Berlín, con la que debía concluir tradicionalmente la visita a la capital del Reich.

Cuando al día siguiente Joachim llevó al padre a la estación, este le dijo: «Bueno, ahora que serás capitán de caballería, tendremos que pensar en el matrimonio. ¿Qué te parece Elisabeth? En definitiva los Baddensen poseen allá en Lestow unas doscientas fanegas, y la chica lo heredará todo algún día». Joachim calló. La víspera casi le había comprado una mujer por cincuenta marcos y hoy negociaba para él una unión legítima. ¡O quizá el viejo se había encaprichado con Elisabeth como con aquella muchacha, cuya mano sentía ahora Joachim otra vez en su nuca! Pero era inconcebible que alguien pudiera atreverse a codiciar a Elisabeth, y todavía más inconcebible que alguien pretendiera violar a una santa valiéndose del propio hijo, por no poderlo hacer personalmente. Casi estaba por disculparse con el padre por tan horrible sospecha;

pero desde luego el viejo era capaz de todo. Sí, uno debería proteger de este viejo a todas las mujeres del mundo, piensa Joachim mientras recorren el andén, y lo sigue pensando mientras sigue el tren con la mirada en un saludo. Pero cuando el tren desaparece, piensa en Ruzena.

También al atardecer piensa aún en Ruzena. Hay tardes primaverales cuyo crepúsculo se prolonga mucho más de lo que está prescrito por la astronomía. Entonces cae sobre la ciudad una humosa, delgada niebla y le da esa opacidad un tanto tensa de las tardes sin trabajo que preceden a los días festivos. Y es también como si la luz hubiera quedado prendida de tal modo en esta niebla opaca y luminosamente gris que persisten en ella hilos de claridad incluso cuando ya se ha tornado negra y aterciopelada. Y así este crepúsculo dura mucho tiempo, tanto tiempo que los dueños de los comercios se olvidan de cerrar las tiendas; se quedan charlando con las dientas ante las puertas, hasta que pasa el guardia y les recuerda sonriente que han rebasado la hora de cierre. Incluso más tarde brillan aún luces en muchas tiendas, pues en la parte trasera del local la familia está cenando; no han echado el travesaño de la puerta como de costumbre, sino que han colocado solo una silla tras ella para indicar que los clientes no podrán ser atendidos, y cuando hayan terminado de comer, saldrán con sus sillas y se sentarán a descansar ante la puerta. Son de envidiar los pequeños comerciantes y artesanos que tienen la vivienda al fondo del local; envidiables en invierno, cuando echan el pesado travesaño y mantienen así doblemente protegido y caliente el local, a través de cuya puerta de cristales sonríe, en época navideña, el adornado árbol de Navidad, envidiables en los suaves atardeceres de primavera y otoño, cuando se sientan ante sus puertas, como en la terraza de su jardín, con el gato en el regazo o rascando con la mano el suave lomo del perro.

Joachim, de regreso del cuartel, pasa por un suburbio. Esto no corresponde a su rango, pues los oficiales suelen regresar a sus hogares en coches del regimiento. Nadie viene a pasear por aquí, ni siquiera Bertrand lo haría, y a Joachim le parece muy inquietante estar haciéndolo él, como si se hubiera metido en terreno resbaladizo. Pero ¿no es casi como si así quisiera rebajarse por Ruzena? ¿O es acaso rebajar a la propia Ruzena? Pues claramente se la imagina en una vivienda de suburbio, quizá incluso en un sótano, a cuya oscura entrada se amontonan legumbres y verduras para la venta, mientras la madre de Ruzena se acurruca allí haciendo punto y habla la oscura lengua extranjera. Joachim nota el olor humeante de las lámparas de petróleo. En la baja bóveda del sótano brilla una luz. Es una lámpara fijada al fondo sobre la sucia pared. Él mismo podría estar casi sentado allí con Ruzena, la mano de ella acariciándole la nuca. Pero se asusta en cuanto cobra conciencia de esta imagen, y se esfuerza en alejarla y en pensar que el mismo crepúsculo de luz gris descansa sobre Lestow. Y en el parque silencioso de niebla, que huele ya a césped húmedo, encuentra a Elisabeth; ella se dirige a casa lentamente, a través de las ventanas brillan las suaves lámparas de petróleo y se reflejan en la creciente oscuridad del atardecer, y también su perrito está con ella, como si también él estuviera cansado. Pero cuando piensa con más agudeza y más intensidad, se ve a sí mismo y a Ruzena en la terraza delante de la casa y Ruzena desliza la mano acariciante por su nuca.

Es fácil comprender que con ese hermoso tiempo primaveral uno estuviera de buen humor y los negocios marcharan viento en popa. Esto opinaba también Bertrand, que estaba en Berlín desde hacía unos días. Pero en el fondo sabía que su buen humor se debía simplemente al éxito que coronaba todos sus actos desde hacía años y que por otra parte necesitaba este buen humor para tener éxito. Era un agradable dejarse ir, como si él no tuviera que desplazarse hacia las cosas, porque ellas acudían flotando a su encuentro. Tal vez esta había sido una de las razones por las que había dejado el regimiento: tantas cosas había que se ofrecían a su alrededor y que entonces le estaban vedadas. ¿Qué le decían a él en aquella época los letreros comerciales? Eran palabras muertas, que se pasaban por alto o que molestaban. Ahora sabía mucho de bancos, sabía lo que ocurría tras las ventanillas, sí, ahora no comprendía solo lo que estaba escrito en los letreros de las ventanillas, descuentos, cambios, giros, pagos, sino que sabía también lo que ocurría en las oficinas de la dirección, sabía juzgar un banco por su capital y sus reservas, y las cotizaciones de la Bolsa le daban una información viva. Comprendía expresiones como tránsito y existencias con franquicia en las agencias de transporte, y todo esto había penetrado en su ser del modo más natural, y le resultaba tan comprensible como la placa de bronce de Steinweg en Hamburgo: EDUARD VON BERTRAND, IMPORTACIÓN DE ALGODÓN. Y que pudiera verse una placa igual en la Rolandstrasse de Bremen y en el Cotton Exchange de Liverpool le hacía sentirse orgulloso.

Cuando encontró en Unter den Linden a Pasenow, anguloso en su larga chaqueta de uniforme con galones, angulosos los hombros, mientras él movía cómodamente los suyos en la tela inglesa, se sintió especialmente contento y lo saludó con la familiaridad y desenvoltura que adoptaba siempre que encontraba a un antiguo camarada, y le preguntó sin más si ya había almorzado y si no quería comer con él en Dressel.

Pasenow, ante el repentino encuentro y la inesperada cordialidad, olvidó lo mucho que había pensado en Bertrand durante los últimos días; de nuevo se avergonzó de estar hablando él, tan bien vestido en su uniforme, con uno que, por así decirlo, tenía que estar desnudo de civil ante él, y hubiera preferido evitar el ofrecimiento de comer juntos. Pero se tranquilizó al constatar que hacía mucho tiempo que no veía a

Bertrand. Con la vida monótona y sedentaria que llevaba Pasenow, esto no tenía nada de extraño, opinó Bertrand. A él por el contrario, con su inquietud y su constante trajín, le parecía que había sido ayer que habían paseado juntos sus primeros galones entre los tilos y habían cenado por primera vez en Dressel —mientras habían entrado—, y en este tiempo sin embargo habían envejecido. Pasenow pensó: habla demasiado; pero como le resultaba agradable que Bertrand poseyera una fea peculiaridad, o como advertía que el silencio mantenido hasta ahora por el antiguo amigo le había mortificado siempre, preguntó, a pesar de su repugnancia a toda indiscreción, dónde demonios se había metido durante este tiempo; Bertrand hizo un ligero gesto con la mano, como queriendo echar a un lado algo sin importancia: «Bueno, en muchos sitios, últimamente en América». Claro, América… América había sido siempre para Joachim el país de los hijos depravados, repudiados, viciosos, ¡y el viejo Von Bertrand había muerto de pena! Pero aquello no encajaba tampoco con el hombre elegante y a todas luces acomodado que estaba sentado frente a él. Pasenow había oído hablar ya de alguno de estos depravados que se había labrado allí una buena posición como hacendado y luego regresaba a Alemania, a buscar una novia alemana, y quizá este venía ahora en busca de Ruzena; pero no, ella no es alemana, sino checa, o, dicho con más exactitud, bohemia. No obstante, obsesionado por la idea, insistió de nuevo: «¿Y regresa usted allí?». «No, por ahora no, antes tengo que ir a la India.» En suma, ¡un aventurero! Y Pasenow miró a su alrededor, avergonzado de estar sentado a la mesa con el aventurero; pero había que afrontarlo: «Así que está usted siempre de viaje». «Bueno, hasta donde lo exigen los negocios… pero me gusta viajar. Ya se sabe, hay que hacer siempre aquello a lo que nos impulsa nuestro demonio interior.» Estas palabras eran una confesión; ahora él lo sabía: Bertrand había abandonado el ejército por los negocios, por afán de lucro, por codicia. Pero Bertrand, con la insensibilidad propia de estos hombres codiciosos, no advirtió el desprecio que inspiraba y siguió con desparpajo: «Mire, Pasenow, cada vez me resulta más incomprensible que siga usted aquí. ¿Por qué no se apunta al menos al servicio de colonias, ya que el Reich nos ha proporcionado esta distracción?». Pasenow y sus compañeros nunca se habían calentado la cabeza con el problema de las colonias; era un asunto reservado a la marina; pero sin embargo se indignó: «¿Distracción?». Bertrand tenía de nuevo aquel gesto irónico en la boca: «Veamos, ¿qué puede sacarse de todo esto? Una pequeña distracción bélica particular y una pequeña fama bélica para los directamente interesados. Con todos los respetos para el doctor Peters naturalmente, y si hubiera llegado antes, yo habría colaborado con él, pero ¿qué se puede sacar de todo esto, salvo romanticismo? Todo es romanticismo… a excepción, claro está, de la actividad misionera de católicos y evangélicos, que llevan a cabo un trabajo razonable y oportuno. Pero todo lo demás… distracción, solo una distracción». Hablaba de forma tan despectiva, que Pasenow se sintió profundamente enojado, aunque su tono reflejaba solo mortificación: «¿Por qué nosotros, alemanes, debemos quedarnos atrás respecto a los otros pueblos?». «Voy a decirle algo, Pasenow; en primer lugar, Inglaterra es Inglaterra; en segundo lugar, tampoco Inglaterra ha ganado todavía la partida; en tercer lugar, prefiero de todos modos invertir capitales sobrantes en valores coloniales ingleses que en alemanes, de modo que incluso podría hablarse de un romanticismo económico colonial; y, en cuarto lugar, ya dije antes que siempre es solo la Iglesia la que tiene un interés sensato y auténtico en la expansión colonial.» La mortificada sorpresa de Joachim von Pasenow iba en aumento, así como la sospecha de que el tal Bertrand quería cegarlo con palabras pedantes e impenetrables y arrastrarlo o inducirlo a algo determinado. Todo aquello tenía algo que ver, de un modo u otro, con el cabello nada militar y casi rizado de Bertrand. Hasta cierto punto resultaba teatral. A Joachim se le ocurrió la palabra abismo y abismo infernal; ¿por qué hablaba siempre aquel hombre de la fe y de la Iglesia? Pero antes de que pudiera hallar una respuesta adecuada, Bertrand se había dado cuenta ya de su asombro: «Sí, vea usted, Europa se ha vuelto un punto muy dudoso para la Iglesia. ¡Con África ocurre lo contrario! Cientos de millones de almas como materia prima para la fe. Y puede estar usted seguro de que un negro bautizado es mejor cristiano que veinte europeos. Es más que comprensible que tanto el catolicismo como el protestantismo luchen por hacerse con estos fanatizados; allí está el futuro de la fe, allí están los futuros paladines de la fe, aquellos que un día arremeterán a sangre y a fuego, en nombre de Cristo, contra una Europa hundida en el paganismo y en el lodo, para colocar finalmente un Papa negro en la silla de Pedro, entre las humeantes ruinas de Roma». Esto es el Apocalipsis de san Juan, pensó Pasenow; blasfema. ¿Y qué pretende con las almas de los negros? Ya no existen traficantes de esclavos, aunque una cosa así podría atribuirse muy bien a un hombre dominado por la codicia. Él mismo ha hablado de su demonio interior. Pero tal vez solo esté bromeando; ya en la escuela no se sabía nunca qué pensaba. «¡Usted bromea! Y en lo que respecta a los turcos y espahíes, ya hemos terminado con ellos.» Bertrand no pudo evitar una sonrisa, y su sonrisa era tan amistosa y alentadora que tampoco Joachim pudo hacer otra cosa que sonreír. Se sonrieron pues amistosamente y sus almas se saludaron a través de las ventanas de los ojos un instante, como dos vecinos que no se han saludado nunca y que por casualidad se asoman al mismo tiempo a la ventana, alegres y avergonzados a un tiempo por este saludo inesperado y simultáneo. Disiparon su vergüenza en un convencionalismo, y Bertrand, levantando su copa, dijo: «Mucho ojo, Pasenow», y Pasenow dijo: «Mucho ojo, Bertrand», y los dos tuvieron que sonreír otra vez.

Cuando salieron del local y se hallaron otra vez en Unter den Linden, bajo los árboles inmóviles, un

tanto marchitos a la cálida luz del sol de la tarde, Pasenow recordó aquello que no se había atrevido a decir durante la comida: «En realidad no comprendo qué tiene usted contra la fe de nosotros, los europeos. Me parece que, como habitante de una gran ciudad, no tiene una visión adecuada del problema. Cuando uno ha crecido, como yo, en el campo, considera estas cosas de otra forma. Nuestra gente del campo está además mucho más apegada al cristianismo de lo que usted parece creer». En cierto modo se sintió audaz por haberle dicho esto a Bertrand cara a cara, un soldado raso que pretendía dar indicaciones estratégicas a un oficial de Estado Mayor, y temió por un momento que Bertrand se enfadara. Pero Bertrand se limitó a decir alegremente: «Bueno, entonces todo irá estupendamente». Después intercambiaron sus direcciones y se prometieron seguir en contacto.

Pasenow tomó un coche de punto para ir a Westend, a las carreras. El vino del Rin, el calor de la tarde y también lo extraordinario de aquel encuentro le habían dejado tras la frente y los parietales —con gusto se habría quitado la rígida gorra— una sensación oscura y quebradiza, no muy distinta al cuero del asiento, que sentía en las yemas de los dedos a través de los guantes blancos, un poco pegajoso incluso, tan caliente lo había puesto el sol. Lamentaba no haber invitado a Bertrand a venirse con él, y se alegraba de que, al menos, su padre no hubiera permanecido en Berlín, pues de ser así seguro que habría estado sentado a su lado. Por otra parte, le alegraba que Bertrand no le hubiese acompañado en traje de civil. Pero tal vez Bertrand quisiera darle una sorpresa, recogería a Ruzena y se encontrarían todos en el hipódromo. Como una familia. Pero estos pensamientos eran absurdos. Ni siquiera Bertrand se exhibiría en el hipódromo con una chica así.

Cuando pocos días después su camarada Leindorff recibió la visita de su anciano padre, fue para Pasenow como un mandato del cielo acudir al Jágerkasino para adelantarse al viejo Leindorff, al que ya veía subir las angostas escaleras con paso apresurado y rectilíneo. Fue a casa en el coche del regimiento y se vistió de civil. Después se puso en camino. En la esquina se encontró a dos soldados; iba ya a llevarse la mano al borde de la gorra para responder a su saludo, cuando se dio cuenta de que no le habían saludado y de que él llevaba chistera en lugar de la gorra; todo aquello era hasta cierto punto disparatado y no pudo evitar una sonrisa, porque era absurdo que el viejo y medio paralítico conde Leindorff, que solo pensaba en sus consultas médicas, estuviera hoy en el Jágerkasino. Lo más sensato sería dar media vuelta y regresar, pero, como esto podía hacerlo en cualquier momento, sintió una leve sensación de libertad y prosiguió su camino. En el fondo hubiera preferido pasear por aquel suburbio para volver a ver el sótano de las verduras con su humeante lámpara de petróleo colgada del muro, pero no podía pasearse por la parte norte con levita y chistera. Allí fuera el atardecer debía de ser hoy deliciosamente crepuscular como entonces, pero aquí, en el centro de la ciudad, todo parecía ser enemigo de la naturaleza, incluso el cielo y el aire que cubrían las estrepitosas luces, los numerosos escaparates y la agitada vida de la calle, eran tan ciudadanos y tan poco hogareños, que experimentó una sensación de agrado y de quietud, aunque también inquietante, al descubrir una tiendecita de lencería, que exponía en un pequeño escaparate sus puntillas, ruches, labores empezadas sobre patrones azules, y al ver la puerta de cristal que, en la parte posterior, conducía evidentemente a la vivienda. Tras el mostrador estaba sentada una mujer de pelo blanco, casi una dama, junto a una muchacha joven cuyo rostro no podía ver; ambas hacían labor. Contempló las mercancías del escaparate y pensó que podría dar una alegría a Ruzena con alguno de aquellos pañuelos de encaje. También esta idea le pareció absurda y siguió adelante; pero al llegar a la esquina siguiente dio media vuelta y volvió sobre sus pasos, impulsado por el deseo de ver el rostro oculto de la muchacha de la tienda; adquirió tres pañuelos finos, en realidad sin destinarlos concretamente a Ruzena, sino porque sí y feliz también de proporcionarle a la anciana una alegría con su compra. Pero la muchacha tenía un rostro indiferente, una expresión casi antipática. Después Joachim se marchó a su casa.

En invierno, en la época de las fiestas cortesanas, que eran una esperanza inconfesada para la baronesa, en primavera, en la época de las carreras y las compras para el verano, la familia Baddensen ocupaba una lujosa casa en Westend, y un domingo por la mañana Joachim von Pasenow fue a visitar a las damas. Acudía raras veces a este distante barrio de chalets, que se extendían rápidamente siguiendo el modelo de los *cottages* ingleses, aunque solo familias acomodadas, con carruaje a su disposición, podían vivir allí, sin notar demasiado el inconveniente del alejamiento de la ciudad. Pero para aquellos privilegiados que podían subsanar este inconveniente espacial, la estancia allí era un pequeño paraíso campestre, y Pasenow, mientras cruzaba por las cuidadas calles entre las villas, sintió penetrar en él, ante el encanto de este barrio residencial, una sensación cálida y agradable. Durante los últimos días muchas cosas habían perdido seguridad y de modo inexplicable esto tenía relación con Bertrand: algún pilar de la vida se había tornado quebradizo, y si bien todo seguía en su antiguo lugar, porque las partes se sostenían unas con otras, Joachim, junto al vago deseo de que la bóveda de este equilibrio se derrumbara y enterrara bajo sí misma los elementos caídos, sentía crecer al mismo tiempo el temor de que aquel vago deseo se cumpliera, y sentía crecer una nostalgia de firmeza, seguridad y paz. Pero aquel barrio lujoso de villas, con sus edificios

palaciegos estilo renacimiento, barroco o suizo, rodeados de bien cuidados jardines, en los que se oían el rastrillo del jardinero, el chorro de las mangas de riego, el canto de las fuentes, destilaba una seguridad tan grande e insular que uno apenas podía creer la profecía de Bertrand de que tampoco Inglaterra había ganado la partida. A través de las ventanas abiertas se oían estudios de Stephen Heller y Clementi: las hijas de estas familias podían seguir tranquilas sus estudios; feliz destino de seguridad y de dulzura, pletórico de amistad, hasta que el amor viene a sustituir a la amistad y el amor se extingue de nuevo en amistad. A lo lejos, aunque no muy lejos, un gallo cantó, como si también él quisiera destacar la rústica sencillez de aquel cuidado barrio residencial: si Bertrand hubiera crecido en el campo, no andaría difundiendo inseguridad, y de haberle dejado a él en su tierra, no se habría hecho tan propenso a la inseguridad. Sería hermoso pasear con Elisabeth por los campos, tocar con dedos inquisitivos el trigo maduro y por las tardes, cuando el aire se impregna del penetrante olor de los establos, atravesar el patio limpio y recién barrido para ver cómo ordeñan. Elisabeth resultaría aquí, entre grandes y rústicos animales, excesivamente esbelta para la pesadez del ambiente, y lo que en la madre era solo natural y hogareño, en ella sería conmovedor y hogareño a un tiempo. Pero para todo aquello era ya para él demasiado tarde, para él, al que habían convertido en un extraño y que era ahora —se estaba dando cuenta— un apatrida como Bertrand.

Le envolvió el recogimiento del jardín, cuyas vallas quedaban ocultas tras los setos. Y el recogimiento de la naturaleza se veía aumentado por el hecho de que la baronesa había hecho sacar al jardín uno de los sillones de felpa del salón: el sillón estaba allí, sobre la gravilla del jardín, como algo exótico y necesitado de calor, con sus patas torneadas y terminadas en ruedas, y agradecía la benignidad del clima y de la naturaleza civilizada, que le permitían permanecer en aquel lugar; pero su color era el de una rosa oscura que se marchitaba. Elisabeth y Joachim se sentaron en las sillas del jardín, cuyos asientos de hierro estaban tachonados por estrellas como encajes de Bruselas.

Después de haber hablado ampliamente de las ventajas de aquel barrio residencial, que resultaba especialmente adecuado para las personas acostumbradas y amantes de la vida campestre, le preguntaron a Joachim por su vida en la capital, y él no pudo dejar de expresar y justificar su añoranza por el campo. Halló absoluta aprobación por parte de las damas; especialmente la baronesa aseguró una y otra vez que ella, y esperaba no le sorprendiera, pasaba con frecuencia días y semanas sin ir al centro de la ciudad, tanto miedo le daban, sí, miedo, el bullicio, el ruido y el gigantesco tráfico. Pero allí, opinó Pasenow, tenían ellas un auténtico refugio, y la conversación recayó de nuevo en las excelencias de aquel barrio privilegiado, hasta que la baronesa, como si quisiera darle una grata sorpresa, le comunicó casi en secreto que les habían ofrecido la compra de la casita con la que se habían encariñado tanto. Y con la alegría anticipada de la posesión le propuso que visitara la casita, que hiciera *le tour du propriétaire*, expresión que pronunció con un asomo de vergüenza e ironía.

Como de costumbre, en la planta baja estaban las habitaciones de vida en común y en el piso superior los dormitorios. Junto al comedor, que irradiaba una confortabilidad sombría con sus viejos muebles alemanes de madera tallada, construirían un jardín de invierno con surtidor, y por supuesto ampliarían también el salón. Después subieron la escalera, que tanto arriba como abajo tenía cortinas de terciopelo que caían en artísticos pliegues, y la baronesa no dejó ni una puerta sin abrir, exceptuando solo las excusadas. Con algo de apuro y un ligero rubor el cuarto de Elisabeth fue expuesto a las miradas masculinas, pero más que esas nubes de blancos encajes que cubrían la cama, las ventanas, el lavabo y el espejo, fue para Joachim vergonzosa y penosa la visión del dormitorio de matrimonio; casi llegó a sospechar que de este modo la baronesa quería obligarle a convertirse en confidente de la casa y cómplice de su vergüenza. Porque allí ante sus ojos, ante los ojos de todos, patente para Elisabeth, a quien él sentía abrumada y violentada por tal conocimiento, cama con cama, a punto para las funciones sexuales de la baronesa, que ahora él veía ante sí, no precisamente desnuda, pero con sus aires de gran dama perdidos y como desgarrada, allí estaba aquel dormitorio, y la habitación se le aparecía de pronto como el centro de la casa, como el altar oculto y sin embargo visible alrededor del cual se había construido todo lo demás. Y también vio de repente con claridad que en todas las casas de aquella larga hilera de villas ante las cuales había pasado, un dormitorio semejante era también el centro, y que las sonatinas y estudios que se escuchaban a través de las abiertas ventanas, tras las cuales el viento primaveral agitaba suavemente los blancos cortinajes, solo servían para encubrir la verdadera situación. Así pues, cada noche se preparan en todas partes las camas para los señores con las sábanas que hipócritamente se doblan en el cuarto de plancha, y la servidumbre y los niños saben a qué fin se destinan; en todas partes los criados y los niños duermen castamente y desparejados en torno al apareado centro de la casa, honestos y castos, pero al servicio y bajo las órdenes de los impúdicos y desvergonzados. ¿Cómo se había podido atrever la baronesa, al ponderar las ventajas del barrio, a incluir la cercanía de la iglesia en estas alabanzas? ¿No tenía ella que pisar la iglesia en último lugar, o, por así decirlo, descalza? Tal vez Bertrand se refería a esto, cuando habló de la irreligiosidad, y Joachim comprendió que los negros paladines de Dios caerían a sangre y fuego sobre estos desechos humanos, a fin de restablecer la verdadera castidad y el cristianismo verdadero. Miró a Elisabeth y creyó leer en sus ojos que compartía su indignación. Y el hecho de que ella pudiera estar destinada a una

profanación similar, y de que él mismo tuviera tal vez que llevar a cabo esta profanación, le enterneció de tal modo que hubiera querido raptarla, solo para montar guardia ante su puerta y para que ella, sin ser ultrajada ni molestada, soñara eternamente un sueño de encajes blancos.

Acompañado amablemente por las damas hasta la planta baja, se despidió con la promesa de volver pronto. Ya en la calle, adquirió conciencia de la vacuidad de esta visita; pensó en cuánto aterrarían a estas damas las palabras de Bertrand, y deseó incluso que alguna vez pudieran escucharlo.

Cuando un hombre, sea a consecuencia del aislamiento de casta que preside su vida, sea a consecuencia de cierta desidia de los propios sentimientos, ha adquirido la costumbre de ignorar a sus semejantes, tiene que causarle extrañeza y asombro que su mirada quede prendida en dos jóvenes desconocidos que charlan cerca de él. Esto fue lo que le sucedió a Joachim una noche en el foyer de la ópera. Los dos hombres eran evidentemente extranjeros y no pasaban mucho de los veinte años; de momento los creyó italianos, no solo porque el corte de sus trajes era un poco insólito, sino porque uno de ellos, de ojos negros y cabello negro, llevaba bigote a la italiana. Después, aunque a Joachim le repugnaba escuchar conversaciones ajenas, pudo comprobar que se servían de una lengua extranjera, pero que no era italiano, y se sintió impelido a escuchar con más atención, hasta que, con un ligero sobresalto, creyó advertir que aquellos dos jóvenes hablaban checo, o, para ser más exactos, bohemio. Su sobresalto carecía de fundamento, y aún le pareció menos fundamentado el sentimiento de infidelidad respecto a Elisabeth que siguió. Naturalmente era posible, aunque no probable, que Ruzena se encontrara aquí en el teatro y que los dos jóvenes fueran a verla a su palco, como él mismo había acudido a veces al de Elisabeth, y tal vez el joven de la barbita negra y los negros cabellos excesivamente rizados tuviera realmente cierto parecido con Ruzena, y no solo por el color del pelo: era tal vez aquella boca un poco demasiado pequeña, cuyos labios se destacaban en exceso sobre el cutis amarillento, aquella nariz demasiado corta y graciosa y aquella sonrisa, que resultaba en cierto modo desafiante —sí, desafiante era la palabra exacta— y que parecía no obstante pedir perdón. Sin embargo, todo esto le parecía absurdo y era muy posible que semejante parecido fueran meras figuraciones suyas; ya que, si pensaba ahora en Ruzena, tenía que reconocer que su imagen había palidecido totalmente, que con toda seguridad no la reconocería por la calle, y que solo podía verla a través de la máscara y por mediación de aquel joven. Esto le tranquilizó y en cierto modo quitó peligro a la situación, sin que uno pudiera alegrarse, ya que al mismo tiempo y a otro nivel experimentó la sensación indecible y espantosa de que la muchacha estaba oculta tras la máscara de un hombre, y este pensamiento le seguía torturando incluso después del entreacto. Representaban *Fausto* y las suaves notas tenían tan poco sentido como el argumento de la ópera, en la que nadie, ni siquiera el propio Fausto, advertía que tras los amados rasgos de Margarita se ocultaba el rostro de Valentín y que Margarita tenía que expiar por ello y no por otra cosa. Tal vez lo supiera Mefistófeles, y Joachim se alegró de que Elisabeth no tuviera ningún hermano. Cuando, al terminar la representación, se encontró de nuevo con el hermano de Ruzena, se sintió aliviado porque con ello le quedaba vedada también la hermana, y se sintió tan seguro que, a pesar del uniforme, se dirigió hacia la Jágerstrasse. También la sensación de infidelidad había desaparecido.

Solo al doblar por la Friedrichstrasse, recordó que no podía entrar en el local vestido de uniforme. Se sintió decepcionado y siguió por la Jágerstrasse. ¿Qué debía hacer? Dio una vuelta a la manzana siguiente, volvió a la Jágerstrasse, y se sorprendió a sí mismo espiando bajo el sombrero de las muchachas que pasaban, en espera de oír palabras italianas. Pero cuando estuvo de nuevo en las cercanías del local, no oyó italiano sino un mal alemán entre áspero y cantarín: «Pero ¿es que ya no me conoce?». Pasenow exclamó contra su voluntad «Ruzena», y pensó al mismo tiempo: qué lamentable. Estaba en plena calle, de uniforme, con una muchacha así, él, que pocos días antes casi se había avergonzado de Bertrand y de su traje de civil, y en lugar de alejarse, olvidó toda compostura y se sintió casi feliz, se sintió feliz de que aquella muchacha mostrara deseos de seguir charlando: «¿Dónde está hoy papá? ¿No viene hoy?». «No, hoy no puede ser, pequeña Ruzena; tampoco…», ¿cómo lo llama ella?, «tampoco el viejo señor vendrá hoy al local…» Y él ahora tenía que darse prisa. Ruzena le miró desconcertada: «Me hacen esperar tanto tiempo y ahora nada…», pero, y su rostro se iluminó, él tenía que hacerle una visita. Joachim contempló aquel rostro temeroso e interrogativo, como queriendo grabarlo definitivamente en su memoria, aunque intentando averiguar también si tras él se escondía el hermano meridional de la barbita. Había alguna semejanza; pero, mientras reflexionaba sobre si una muchacha que lleva marcado en el rostro a su hermano podía tener algún ascendiente sobre él, le vino a la mente su propio hermano, rubio y varonil con su barba corta, y esto le hizo volver a la realidad. Claro que era muy distinto; Helmuth pertenecía al campo, era un cazador, no tenía nada en común con estos blandos ciudadanos del sur, y sin embargo se sintió tranquilizado. Su mirada seguía indagando, pero la aversión desapareció y sintió la necesidad de hacer algo cariñoso, de decirle algo amable, para que la muchacha conservara un buen recuerdo de él; estaba indeciso todavía: no, pequeña Ruzena, no podía ir a visitarla, pero… «¿Pero?», sonó una voz temerosa y llena de esperanza… Joachim no supo en un primer instante qué iba a seguir a este pero, y luego sí lo supo: «Podríamos encontrarnos en las afueras, almorzar juntos». Sí, sí, sí, sí, ella conocía una pequeña hostería: ¡mañana! No, mañana era

imposible, pero el miércoles él no tenía servicio, y acordaron encontrarse el miércoles. Entonces ella se puso de puntillas y le susurró al oído: «Eres amable y bueno, tú», y se alejó corriendo, desapareció tras la puerta, sobre la que ardían las lámparas de gas. Pasenow vio a su padre subir la escalera a pasos rápidos y enérgicos y su corazón se contrajo inequívoca y dolorosamente.

Ruzena estaba encantada por el rígido convencionalismo con que Joachim la había tratado en el restaurante, e incluso olvidó la decepción de verle aparecer en traje de civil. El día era fresco y lluvioso; pero ella no había querido renunciar a su programa y después de comer fueron a Charlottenburg y al Havel. Ya en el coche, Ruzena le había sacado un guante a Joachim, y ahora, mientras caminaban a lo largo de la orilla, le cogió el brazo y lo enlazó con el suyo. Andaban lentamente, pisaban un paisaje lleno de expectación por su silencio, y que sin embargo no podía esperar otra cosa que la lluvia y la noche. El cielo descansaba blandamente sobre ellos, unido a veces a la tierra en unidad más íntima por retazos de lluvia, y para ellos, caminantes en el silencio, era también como si solo les hubiera quedado la esperanza, como si todo lo que en ellos había estado vivo se les hubiera escurrido entre los dedos, entrelazados como las hojas de un capullo cerrado. Apoyados hombro contra hombro, semejantes desde lejos a un triángulo, caminaban a lo largo de la orilla, mudos, porque ninguno de los dos sabía qué era lo que los había impulsado el uno hacia el otro. Pero de improviso, mientras andaban, Ruzena se había inclinado sobre su mano, que mantenía prisionera en la suya y, antes de que él pudiera liberarla, la había besado. Joachim miró unos ojos, arrasados en lágrimas, miró una boca, que a punto de estallar en un sollozo dijo sin embargo: «Cuando te encontré por la escalera dije, Ruzena no es para ti, nunca es para ti. Y ahora estás aquí…». Pero ella no le ofreció los labios para el beso esperado, sino que dejó caer de nuevo, casi con avidez, su rostro sobre la mano de Joachim y, al no querer él consentirlo, la mordió, sin violencia, con tanta suavidad y dulzura como un cachorro juguetón; después, mirando satisfecha la señal, dijo: «Ahora continuemos el paseo. La lluvia no hace daño». La lluvia se sumergía suavemente en el río, se deslizaba silenciosa sobre las hojas de los sauces. Un bote yacía medio hundido junto a la orilla; por debajo de una pequeña pasarela de madera desembocaba en las tranquilas aguas del río un arroyo tumultuoso, y Joachim se sintió también arrastrado por una corriente, como si el anhelo que lo embargaba fuera Un calmo y suave fluir de su corazón, unas aguas respirantes, ansiosas de desembocar en los labios amados y sumergirse en ellos como en un lago de aguas inmensamente tranquilas. Era como si el verano se deshiciera en rocío, y el agua se tornó mansa, se deslizó por las hojas y cayó en gotas de rocío sobre la hierba. A lo lejos se había formado un tenue velo de niebla, y si daban media vuelta se cerraría tras ellos, de modo que sus pasos eran como un reposo. Al arreciar la lluvia, buscaron refugio bajo los árboles, donde el suelo todavía estaba seco, una mancha de seco y no disuelto polvo estival, casi miserable entre tanta disolución; Ruzena se sacó las agujas del sombrero, no solo porque esta servidumbre ciudadana la molestaba, sino para proteger a Joachim de sus puntas afiladas, se quitó el sombrero y apoyó la espalda contra Joachim, como si fuera el árbol protector. Había echado la cabeza hacia atrás, y él inclinó el rostro de modo que sus labios rozaron la frente y los negros rizos que la enmarcaban. Él no veía las finas y un tanto tontas arrugas que surcaban la frente de Ruzena, tal vez porque estaba demasiado cerca para distinguirlas, tal vez porque todo mirar se había convertido en sentir. Pero ella sentía los brazos que la rodeaban, las manos de él en las suyas, se sentía como en las ramas del árbol, y el aliento de Joachim en su frente era como el deslizarse de la lluvia sobre las hojas; estaban tan inmóviles, y el cielo gris se fundió hasta tal punto con la superficie del agua, que los sauces de la isla parecían flotar a lo lejos en un lago gris, no se sabía si colgando desde arriba o apoyados abajo. Pero Ruzena observó entonces las mojadas mangas de su chaqueta y sugirió quedamente que debían regresar. El agua les caía ahora en pleno rostro, pero no podían ir más aprisa, porque se habría roto el encanto, y no volvieron a sentirse seguros hasta que estuvieron tomando café en el pequeño quiosco. El agua corría cada vez más densa por los cristales del rústico mirador y caía en suave parloteo desde el alero. Cuando la hostelera salió de la habitación, Ruzena dejó la taza, le quitó a él la suya de las manos y le cogió la cabeza, la atrajo hacia sí, muy cerca de su$ ojos, tan cerca, y sin embargo todavía sin besos, que sus miradas se fundieron y la tensión en su dulzura se hizo casi insoportable. Pero en el coche, bajo la capota y con las cortinillas corridas, como en lo hondo de una cueva oscura, el suave y quedo tamborileo de las gotas sobre el cuero tendido, viendo solo del cochero el borde inferior de la esclavina y del mundo solo las dos franjas grises y mojadas del camino por las rendijas a derecha y a izquierda y pronto no viendo ni siquiera esto, entonces sí se acercaron sus rostros, desembocaron y se fundieron uno en otro, quietos y fluyentes como el río, perdidos e irrecuperables, siempre reencontrados y sumergidos de nuevo en lo intemporal. Fue un beso que duró una hora y catorce minutos. Y el coche se detuvo frente a la casa de Ruzena. Pero cuando él quiso entrar con ella, Ruzena sacudió la cabeza y él se alejó, pero el dolor de aquella despedida era tan intenso que a los pocos pasos volvió atrás y cogió aquella mano que seguía tendida inmóvil y anhelante, arrastrado por el ansia propia y atraído por la de ella, los dos como en un sueño, como sonámbulos, subieron por la oscura escalera que crujía bajo sus pies, atravesaron la oscura antesala y, en la habitación, ensombrecida por la tarde lluviosa, se dejaron caer desvanecidos sobre la burda colcha que cubría oscuramente el lecho,

buscaron de nuevo el beso del que bruscamente les habían arrancado, los rostros húmedos de lluvia o de lágrimas, no lo sabían. Ruzena se separó, condujo su mano a los cierres que cerraban a la espalda su corpiño y su voz cantarina sonó oscura: «Suelta esto», susurró Ruzena, mientras tiraba de su corbata y los botones de su chaqueta. Y en un repentino acto de humildad, ya fuera ante él, fuera por agradecimiento hacia Dios, cayó de rodillas, la cabeza junto al borde de la cama, y le desabrochó los zapatos. Oh, qué espantoso era aquello, por qué no dejarse sumergir simplemente, olvidando la coraza que los ocultaba, y, sin embargo, cuán agradecido le estaba por simplificar tan conmovedoramente la situación: oh, liberación de su sonrisa, al descubrir la cama en que se precipitaron. Todavía molestaban los bordes tiesos y almidonados de la pechera de la camisa, que pinchaban la barbilla de Ruzena, y ella, abriéndola y metiendo el rostro entre los rígidos bordes, ordenó: «Quítate esto», y ya solo hubo liberación y sensaciones, suavidad del cuerpo, aliento, ahogo en las corrientes del sentir, encanto que surge de la angustia. Oh, angustia de vida, que fluye de la carne viva que recubre los huesos, suavidad de la piel, que tensa se extiende sobre ella, terrible presagio del esqueleto, del tórax enmarcado de costillas que tú puedes rodear con tus brazos y que palpitante se apoya en ti con un corazón que late junto al tuyo. Oh, dulce olor de la piel, perfume húmedo, blandos surcos bajo los senos, oscuridad de las axilas. Pero Joachim estaba todavía demasiado turbado, los dos estaban demasiado turbados para poder concienciar el encanto, solo sabían que estaban juntos y que, no obstante, debían buscarse. En la oscuridad vio el rostro de Ruzena, pero parecía deslizarse, como si se perdiera entre las oscuras riberas del río de bucles, y lo buscó premiosamente con la mano para cerciorarse de que estaba allí, encontró la frente y los párpados, bajo los cuales descansa duro el globo ocular, encontró la deliciosa redondez de las mejillas y la línea de la boca, abierta al beso. Las olas del deseo se iban sucediendo unas a otras; arrastrado por la corriente, su beso encontró el de ella, y mientras los sauces de las riberas del río crecían y se tendían de una orilla a la otra encerrándolos como una cueva de felicidad, en cuya apacible serenidad descansara el silencio del lago eterno, la voz de Joachim aunque hablaba muy bajo, ahogado y sin respiración, buscando únicamente el aliento de ella, estalló en un grito, en un «te quiero» que la hizo abrirse, como se abre un molusco en el mar, y él se sumergió en ella en un viaje sin retorno.

Inesperada llegó la noticia de la muerte de su hermano. Había muerto en Posen, en un duelo con un hacendado polaco. De haber sucedido unas semanas antes, tal vez Joachim no se habría sentido trastornado. En los veinte años que llevaba lejos de su casa, la imagen de su hermano se había tornado cada vez más borrosa y, cuando pensaba en él, solo veía ante sí al muchacho rubio en ropa de niño —hasta que lo habían enviado a él a la academia, siempre los habían vestido igual—, e incluso ahora lo primero que imaginó fue un féretro infantil. Pero de inmediato se destacó junto a esta imagen un Helmuth varonil, de barba rubia, imagen idéntica a la que le había asaltado aquella noche en la Jágerstrasse, cuando temió no reconocer ya el rostro de una muchacha tal y como es: ah, entonces los ojos claros del cazador lo habían salvado de las quimeras a las que otro le había querido arrastrar para hundirlo en ellas, y esos ojos que le había prestado entonces los había cerrado Helmuth para siempre, tal vez con el fin de regalárselos también para siempre. ¿Le había exigido él esto a Helmuth? Se sentía libre de culpa y sin embargo parecía que esta muerte hubiese ocurrido por él, como si él hubiera sido su causa. Era curioso que Helmuth hubiera llevado la barba como tío Bernhard, la misma barba, corta y tupida, que dejaba la boca al descubierto, y ahora le parecía a Joachim que él siempre había considerado a Helmuth responsable de su entrada en la academia y su carrera militar, y no al tío Bernhard, que sin embargo era el verdadero responsable. Bien, Helmuth se había podido quedar en casa, había representado además una comedia; tal vez este era el motivo, pero todo esto se mezclaba de un modo sorprendente, tanto más sorprendente cuanto que él sabía, desde hacía tiempo, que la vida de su hermano no era nada envidiable. Vio de nuevo ante sí el ataúd infantil y el rencor contra su padre aumentó. O sea que el viejo había logrado también echar de casa a este otro hijo. Era un rencoroso sentimiento de liberación hacer recaer la responsabilidad de esta muerte sobre el padre.

Fue al entierro. Al llegar a Stolpin, encontró una carta de Helmuth: «Ignoro si saldré con vida de este asunto, un tanto banal. Naturalmente espero que sí, pero en el fondo casi me da igual. Aplaudo el hecho de que exista algo así como un código del honor, el cual nos presenta, en esta vida tan indiferente, un destello de una idea más elevada, a la que uno puede someterse. Espero que tú hayas encontrado en tu vida más valores que yo en la mía; a veces te he envidiado tu carrera militar; por lo menos es un servicio a algo más grande que uno mismo. No sé qué piensas tú de esto, pero te escribo para advertirte que, si yo muero, no dejes la carrera militar para hacerte cargo de la hacienda. Tarde o temprano será inevitable, pero mientras el padre viva es mejor que permanezcas lejos de casa, a no ser que la madre te necesite. Mis mejores deseos para ti». Seguía una serie de disposiciones diversas, cuya ejecución Joachim debía vigilar, y para terminar manifestaba la esperanza, un tanto sorprendente, de que Joachim no estuviera tan solo como él.

Los padres estaban afectados de una forma extraña, incluso la madre. El padre lo saludó con un apretón de manos y dijo: «Cayó por el honor, por el honor de su nombre», y después, con pasos enérgicos y rectilíneos, recorrió silencioso la habitación de un lado a otro. Al cabo de un momento repitió: «Cayó por el honor», y salió de la habitación.

Habían instalado la capilla ardiente en el gran salón. Desde el vestíbulo Joachim advirtió el denso perfume de las flores y las coronas: demasiado denso para un ataúd infantil, pensamiento este obsesivo y absurdo, y sin embargo Joachim se detuvo vacilante ante la puerta cargada de cortinas, no se atrevió a mirar, fijó la vista en el suelo. Conocía el parquet, conocía también las placas triangulares contiguas al umbral, conocía los adornos que venían a continuación, y al seguirlos con la mirada, intentando, como hacía de niño, abarcar el artístico diseño, llega al borde de la negra alfombra que han tendido bajo el catafalco. Algunas hojas, caídas de las coronas, yacen allí. Tiene ganas de volver a centrar su atención en los adornos, da unos pasos y ve el ataúd. No era un ataúd infantil, por fortuna; pero sin embargo le contuvo el temor de contemplar con sus ojos videntes los ojos muertos del hombre, unos ojos que han tenido que apagarse tanto que el rostro del muchacho se ha ahogado en ellos, tal vez arrastrando consigo al hermano a quien había regalado los ojos, y la idea de que él mismo yacía allí se hizo tan penetrante que experimentó como una liberación y le pareció una prueba de buena suerte descubrir, al acercarse, que el féretro estaba cerrado. Alguien dijo que el rostro del muerto estaba desfigurado, por la herida del disparo. Apenas lo oyó, permaneció junto al ataúd, la mano apoyada en la tapa. Y con esa torpeza que invade al ser humano ante un cadáver y ante el silencio de la muerte, en que todo lo real se disgrega y aleja, en que antiguas costumbres se quiebran y desploman, en que el aire se enrarece y se hace irrespirable, era como si nunca más pudiera apartarse del túmulo y solo con un gran esfuerzo logró recordar que este era el salón grande y que el féretro ocupaba el lugar del piano y que detrás de la alfombra tenía que haber un trozo de parquet que nunca se había pisado; se dirigió allí lentamente, tocó la pared cubierta con un paño negro, palpó bajo la gruesa tela los marcos de los cuadros y de la Cruz de Hierro, y esta reconquista de un fragmento de realidad transformó la muerte, de modo original y casi fascinante, en una especie de problema de tapicero, dio un aire casi divertido al hecho de que hubieran colocado a Helmuth en aquella habitación, el féretro decorado con toda clase de flores, como un mueble nuevo, unió lo incomprensible de nuevo tan estrechamente a lo comprensible y a la fuerza de la certidumbre que la vivencia de estos minutos —¿o habían sido solo segundos?— desembocó en un feliz sentimiento de tranquila confianza. El padre apareció en compañía de unos señores y Joachim le oyó repetir varias veces: «Murió por el honor». Pero cuando aquellos señores se hubieron marchado y Joachim creía estar otra vez solo, oyó de nuevo repentinamente: «Murió por el honor», y vio al padre pequeño y solo junto al féretro. Se sintió obligado a acercársele. «Ven, padre», le dijo, y lo acompañó fuera de la habitación. En la puerta, el padre lo miró abiertamente y dijo, como si quisiera aprendérselo de memoria y deseara que Joachim también lo hiciera: «Murió por el honor».

Entonces llegó mucha gente. En el patio estaban los bomberos del pueblo. También las asociaciones de veteranos de guerra del contorno se habían congregado allí y formaban una alineada compañía de chisteras y levitas negras, en las cuales no era raro ver la Cruz de Hierro. Los coches de los vecinos hacían su aparición y, mientras se asignaba a las calesas un adecuado sitio a la sombra, Joachim debía atender a la concurrencia y hacer los honores ante el féretro de su hermano. El barón Von Baddensen había venido solo, ya que sus damas se encontraban aún en Berlín, y al saludarlo le vino a Joachim la idea, que apartó de sí lleno de cólera, de que aquel señor podía ver un buen partido para su hija en el ahora único heredero de Stolpin, y sintió vergüenza por Elisabeth. De la parte alta de la fachada colgaba inmóvil una bandera negra que llegaba casi hasta la terraza.

La madre bajó la escalera del brazo del padre. Todos se sorprendían de su firmeza, la admiraban. Pero tal vez obedecía solo a aquella pereza del sentimiento que le era tan propia. Se formó el cortejo fúnebre y, cuando los coches enfilaron la calle del pueblo y apareció la iglesia ante ellos, todos se alegraron de entrar en la fresca y blanca iglesia, liberados del cálido sol de la tarde, que los abrasaba agudo y polvoriento bajo el pesado paño del luto o los uniformes. El pastor pronunció un sermón, en el que habló mucho del honor, diestramente unido a consideraciones que exaltaban el honor del Altísimo; el órgano clamó que de lo que más amamos debemos separamos… apartarnos, eso es, Joachim esperaba siempre la rima, a ver si encajaba o no. Después fueron a pie al cementerio, sobre cuya puerta brillaba un descanse en paz en doradas letras de latón, y los carruajes avanzaban lentamente detrás en una larga nube de polvo. El cielo irradiado de sol se arqueaba en un azul purpúreo sobre la seca y granulosa tierra, que esperaba la entrega del cadáver de Helmuth, si bien no era la tierra propiamente dicha, sino el panteón familiar, una pequeña cueva abierta, el que recibía al recién llegado en un aburrido bostezo. Cuando Joachim vació por tercera vez la pequeña pala, miró hacia abajo, vio los bordes de los féretros de los abuelos y los tíos y pensó que habían dejado un sitio libre para el padre y que tal vez por esto no habían enterrado allí al tío Bernhard. Después, cuando la tierra cayó sobre el féretro de Helmuth y golpeó pulverizada las paredes del panteón, se acordó, con la pequeña pala de juguete en la mano, de los días de la niñez sobre la blanda arena del río, vio de nuevo ante sí a su hermano como un niño, se vio a sí mismo dentro del ataúd y le pareció como si la sequedad de este día de verano estafara a Helmuth no solo la edad sino la muerte. Entonces Joachim deseó para su propia muerte un día suave de lluvia, en que el mismo cielo descendiera para acoger el alma, a fin de que esta afluyera a él como en los brazos de Ruzena. Eran pensamientos lascivos, impropios de aquel lugar, pero no era él el único responsable de ellos, sino también todos los otros, a los que ahora cedía el sitio frente a la

tumba abierta, y también el padre tenía parte de esta responsabilidad: porque la fe de todos ellos era hipócrita, era frágil y polvorienta, juguete de la lluvia y la luz del sol. ¿No cabía desear que llegaran los ejércitos de los negros, a fin de que limpiaran a fondo todo esto y el Salvador resucitara de nuevo en toda su Gloria y llevara otra vez a los hombres a su Reino? Cristo colgaba de su cruz de mármol sobre la tumba, cubierto solo con un lienzo, que ocultaba su desnuda vergüenza, y con la corona de espinas, de la que caían gotas de bronce, y también Joachim notó unas gotas en sus mejillas: tal vez eran lágrimas de las que no se había dado cuenta, pero tal vez se debían simplemente al calor agobiante; él no lo sabía, y apretó las manos que se le tendían.

Los veteranos de guerra y los bomberos habían rendido los últimos honores al muerto con un desfile a paso militar, las cabezas vueltas hacia la izquierda, las botas resonaron sobre la gravilla del cementerio, rígidas desfilaron las filas de a cuatro por la puerta del cementerio, acompañadas por las concisas y secas órdenes del jefe. Desde un peldaño de la capilla del mausoleo, les pasaron revista el señor Von Pasenow, el sombrero en la mano, Joachim, con la mano junto al casco, y entre ellos la señora Von Pasenow. También los otros militares presentes se mantenían firmes y con la mano junto al casco. Después se acercaron los carruajes y Joachim subió con sus padres a un coche cuyos picaportes y otras partes metálicas, al igual que el metal de los arneses, habían sido recubiertos cuidadosamente con un crespón negro por el cochero; Joachim descubrió también un lazo de crespón negro en el látigo. Ahora la madre lloraba y Joachim, que no sabía qué decir para consolarla, se preguntaba por qué la bala mortal no le había alcanzado a él en lugar de a Helmuth. Pero el padre permanecía muy tieso en el asiento negro de cuero, que no era duro y resquebrajado como en los coches de punto de Berlín, sino flexible y muy bien tapizado con botones de cuero. A veces parecía que el padre quisiera decir alguna cosa, algo como punto final a los pensamientos que evidentemente le tenían absorbido y prisionero, porque iba a romper a hablar, pero inmediatamente volvía a quedarse rígido y solo movía los labios mudos sin decir nada; finalmente dijo con voz aguda: «Le han rendido los últimos honores», levantó un dedo, como si todavía esperara algo o quisiera añadir algo, y dejó caer de nuevo la mano abierta sobre el muslo. Entre el borde del guante negro y el puño almidonado, con un gran gemelo negro, asomaba un trozo de piel con vello rojizo.

Los días siguientes transcurrieron en el silencio. La madre se entregaba a sus ocupaciones; estaba en el establo cuando se ordeñaba, en el gallinero durante la recogida de los huevos, en los lavaderos. A veces Joachim cabalgaba por los campos; era el caballo que había regalado a Helmuth, y era como un homenaje de amor al difunto. Al anochecer el patio estaba barrido, y la gente se sentaba en los bancos frente a las dependencias de la servidumbre y disfrutaba del viento fresco, suave. Una vez hubo por la noche una tormenta y Joachim se dio cuenta asustado de que casi había olvidado a Ruzena. Al padre apenas le veía; generalmente permanecía encerrado en su escritorio y leía las cartas de pésame o las anotaba en un papel. Solo el pastor, que les visitaba diariamente y a menudo se quedaba a cenar, hablaba del muerto, pero, como era una especie de charla profesional, apenas se le prestaba atención y su único oyente parecía ser el señor Von Pasenow, que de vez en cuando asentía con la cabeza y parecía querer decir algo que le abrumaba; pero casi siempre se limitaba a repetir alguna de las últimas palabras del pastor con un gesto que las corroboraba, como: «Sí, sí, reverendo, unos padres puestos duramente a prueba».

Después Joachim partió. Cuando se despidió del padre, el viejo estaba otra vez paseando arriba y abajo por la habitación. Joachim recordó innumerables despedidas en este mismo cuarto, que detestaba, pese a serle familiar con sus trofeos de caza en las paredes, con la escupidera en un rincón junto a la chimenea, con los utensilios de escribir, que ya estaban allí en tiempos del abuelo, con las múltiples revistas de caza que yacían sobre la mesa, la mayoría sin abrir. Esperaba que el padre se encajaría como siempre el monóculo y le dejaría partir con un breve «Bueno, pues buen viaje, Joachim». Pero esta vez el padre no decía nada; siguió paseando con las manos a la espalda. Así que Joachim, por segunda vez, repitió: «Padre, ahora debo irme, es la hora del tren». «Bueno, pues buen viaje, Joachim», respondió por fin como de costumbre, «pero quería decirte algo, creo que ahora volverás pronto a casa. Esto se ha quedado vacío, sí, vacío…», miró a su alrededor, «… pero no todo el mundo lo entiende… naturalmente hay que defender el honor…», había reanudado su paseo y añadió confidencial: «¿Y cómo van las cosas con Elisabeth? Ya hablamos de esto…». «Padre, es muy tarde», dijo Joachim, «voy a perder el tren.» El viejo le tendió la mano y Joachim se la estrechó con desgana.

Al pasar por el pueblo, vio en el reloj de la iglesia que tenía tiempo de sobra para tomar el tren; era algo que ya sabía. La puerta de la iglesia estaba casualmente abierta y Joachim hizo detener el coche. Era el momento de saldar una deuda, una deuda para con la iglesia, que solo había sido para él un frescor agradable, una deuda para con el pastor, cuyo hermoso sermón no había escuchado, una deuda para con Helmuth, cuyo entierro había profanado con pensamientos irreverentes, en una palabra, una deuda para con Dios. Entró y buscó la sensación de su niñez y sus visitas a la iglesia, cuando él, Joachim von Pasenow, siempre sobrecogido de nuevo, estaba allí cada domingo, frente a la faz de Dios. En aquel entonces sabía muchos cánticos religiosos y los cantaba con fervor. Pero ahora, solo en la iglesia, no iba a ponerse a cantar.

Debía limitarse a concentrar sus pensamientos en Dios y en su culpabilidad ante Dios, en su pequeñez y en su miseria ante Dios; pero sus pensamientos se negaban a encontrar a Dios. Solo acudieron a su mente las palabras de Isaías, que había oído en aquel mismo lugar: «Un buey conoce a su amo y un asno el pesebre de su amo; pero Israel no lo conoce y mi pueblo no lo advierte». Sí, Bertrand tenía razón, habían perdido el cristianismo, y ahora intentó rezar el Padrenuestro, con los ojos cerrados y cuidando bien de no recitar palabras vacías, sino atendiendo al significado de cada una; y cuando llegó a «como nosotros perdonamos a nuestros deudores», sintió de nuevo la suave, temerosa y sin embargo confiada sensación de la niñez: se acordó de que siempre había asociado este pasaje con su padre y de que había sacado de ahí la convicción de poder perdonar al padre, de comportarse con él todo lo bien que un hijo debe comportarse; y ahora resonaron en sus oídos las palabras del viejo que hablaban de soledad, una soledad que evidentemente le oprimía y de la que era necesario liberarlo. Joachim abandonó la iglesia y le vinieron a la mente las palabras «elevado y fortalecido», pero las palabras no estaban vacías, sino que tenían un sentido positivo, joven. Se propuso visitar a Elisabeth.

Ya en el coche, oyó otra vez en su interior «elevado y fortalecido», pero ahora solo iban unidas a la imagen de una pechera almidonada y a una gozosa nostalgia de Ruzena.

II

Por la Kónigstrasse se acercaba un transeúnte. Era obeso y bajo, realmente rechoncho, y todo en él era fofo, de modo que uno podía pensar que por la mañana había sido embuchado dentro de sus ropas. Era un transeúnte serio, que llevaba pantalones negros y una chaqueta de alpaca gris, y su pecho estaba cubierto por una barba castaña. Evidentemente tenía prisa, pero su andar no era rápido y rectilíneo, sino una especie de grave anadeo, como corresponde a un hombre grave y fofo que tiene prisa. Su rostro no solo se escondía detrás de la barba, sino también tras unos quevedos, a través de los cuales el hombre dirigía severas miradas a los demás transeúntes, y realmente parecía inconcebible que un hombre así, que anadeaba con tanta premura tras urgentes negocios y que lanzaba miradas tan severas y duras a pesar de su fofez, fuera seguramente en otros sectores de su vida un hombre amable, que hubiera también mujeres que él amaba, mujeres y niños ante los cuales la barba desvelara una sonrisa: mujeres que se sintieran atraídas a besar la carne rosada y la oscura cavidad en la barba.

Cuando Joachim vio a este hombre, lo siguió automáticamente. Daba igual adonde fuera. Desde que sabía que en Berlín había un representante de la firma de Bertrand, y que el despacho se encontraba en una de las calles entre la Alexanderplatz y la Bolsa, algo lo atraía a menudo hacia aquel barrio, como le había ocurrido antes con el suburbio proletario; y el no tener ya que buscar a Ruzena allí era casi como un ascenso para ella. Pero él no venía aquí para encontrar a Bertrand; por el contrario, evitaba esta zona cuando sabía que Bertrand estaba en Berlín, y en realidad tampoco sentía ningún especial interés por el representante de Bertrand. Solo que no dejaba de ser extraño que la verdadera vida de Bertrand tuviera que desarrollarse precisamente en este ámbito, y cuando Joachim transitaba por estas calles, no solo escrutaba las fachadas de las casas como si quisiera descubrir qué oficinas se ocultaban tras ellas, sino que miraba también a esos tipos de civil por debajo de sus sombreros, como si fueran mujeres. Él mismo se sorprendía a veces de esto, pues apenas sabía que intentaba averiguar en sus rostros si eran seres de una especie distinta y si tenían unas características que Bertrand había podido ya asimilar, pero que todavía mantenía ocultas. Sí, el hermetismo de estos seres era tan grande que ni siquiera necesitaban barba para esconderse tras ella. Le parecían incluso un poco más confiados y menos hipócritas cuando llevaban barba, y tal vez fuese esta la razón que lo impulsó a seguir al hombre gordo y apresurado. De repente le pareció que aquel hombre que andaba ante él se parecía extrañamente a la imagen que desde siempre se había formado del representante de Bertrand. Tal vez fuese absurdo, pero, cuando algunas personas saludaron al hombre, se alegró de que el representante de Bertrand disfrutara de tal consideración. En definitiva, no le habría sorprendido que el propio Bertrand, mágicamente transformado, bajo y rechoncho, gordo y barbudísimo, le hubiera salido al encuentro: pues cómo habría podido conservar su aspecto si se había hundido en un mundo completamente distinto. Y aunque Joachim sabía que cuanto pensaba carecía de orden y sentido, parecía, sin embargo, que toda esta trama aparentemente confusa tuviera un orden oculto: bastaba encontrar el lazo que unía a Ruzena con toda esta gente, aquel vínculo profundo y secreto, y quizá él había tenido en la mano un extremo de aquel lazo cuando creyó ver en Bertrand al amante adecuado para Ruzena; pero ahora tenía las manos vacías y solo recordó que una vez Bertrand se excusó ante él por tener que pasar la noche con unos amigos de negocios, y Joachim no podía apartar la idea de que este hombre había sido aquel amigo de negocios. Probablemente los dos han estado juntos en el Jágerkasino y el hombre ha deslizado con disimulo cincuenta marcos hacia Ruzena.

Cuando uno sigue a alguien por la callé, y aunque sea de modo automático y con aparente indiferencia, ocurre que pronto vincula toda clase de deseos, tanto buenos como malos, con la persona a la que sigue. Quizá quiere al menos verle el rostro y desea que se dé la vuelta, aunque desde la muerte del hermano uno crea estar a salvo de tener que buscar el rostro de Ruzena en aquel temido rostro. Por otra parte no tiene relación con nada el que Joachim piense que la postura erguida de toda esta gente que va por la calle es totalmente improcedente, es independiente de sus mejores conocimientos o surge de una triste ignorancia, ya que todos estos cuerpos tendrán que tenderse al morir. Y el hombre que avanzaba ante él no andaba con pasos duros, incisivos y rectilíneos, ni había tampoco peligro de que se cayera y se rompiera una pierna, era demasiado fofo.

En este momento el hombre se detuvo en la esquina de la Rochstrasse, como si esperase algo; tal vez esperaba que ahora Joachim le devolviera los cincuenta marcos. Joachim estaba realmente obligado a ello y sintió que lo invadía el ardiente rubor de la vergüenza, porque él, de puro miedo a que se pudiera pensar que se había comprado una mujer o de que él mismo por esta razón pudiera empezar a dudar del amor de Ruzena, la había abandonado en su odiosa actividad de animadora; y cayó la venda de sus ojos: él, un oficial prusiano, era el amante secreto de una mujer pagada por otros hombres. Un deshonor solo puede lavarse con una bala de pistola, pero antes de que pudiera reflexionar sobre esto con todas sus fatales consecuencias, el pensamiento se desvaneció, se desvaneció como la imagen de Bertrand, porque el hombre cruzó la Rochstrasse, y Joachim no debía perderlo de vista antes de que él, sí… antes de que él… imposible saber qué. Bertrand sí que lo tenía fácil, estaba en aquel mundo y al mismo tiempo en este, pero también Ruzena estaba entre dos mundos. ¿Era este el motivo de que ambos se correspondieran el uno al otro? Pero ahora sus pensamientos chocaban y se entremezclaban como los hombres en el torbellino que le rodeaba, y aunque veía ante sí una meta hacia la que quería encauzar sus ideas, era sin embargo una meta fluctuante y escurridiza como la espalda del hombre rechoncho que tenía ante sí. Si él había robado Ruzena a su legítimo dueño, era lógico que la mantuviera escondida como un botín. Intentó recobrar la debida compostura, erguido y rígido, no mirar más a los civiles. El hormiguero humano que lo rodeaba, el bullicio, como decía la baronesa, todo aquel ir y venir de rostros y espaldas, parecía una masa flotante y deslizante, inalcanzable. ¡Adonde conduciría todo aquello! Y al echarse para atrás a fin de recobrar el porte reglamentario, comprendió liberado que solo es posible amar a un ser de un mundo distinto. Por eso no podría amar nunca a Elisabeth y por eso Ruzena tenía que ser bohemia. Amor quiere decir huir del propio mundo al del otro, y así él, pese a sus vergonzosos celos, había abandonado a Ruzena en su mundo, para que ella huyera siempre y se refugiara dulcemente en él. Estaba ahora frente a la banda del regimiento, y se irguió aún más rígidamente, tan rígido como durante el oficio religioso dominical para la tropa. En la esquina de la Spandauer Strasse el hombrecillo aminoró el paso, indeciso al borde de la acera; probablemente un hombre de negocios de esa clase tiene miedo de los caballos en la calle. Naturalmente era absurdo que él tuviera que devolverle dinero a aquel hombre; pero había que sacar a Ruzena del casino, esto era indiscutible. Ella seguiría siendo de todos modos una bohemia. Un ser de un mundo extraño. Pero él ¿de dónde era? ¿Hasta dónde había llegado? ¿Y Bertrand? De nuevo vio a Bertrand ante sí, sorprendentemente fofo y bajo, y mirando con severidad a través de los quevedos, extraño a él, extraño a Ruzena, que es bohema, extraño a Elisabeth, que pasea por un parque silencioso, extraño a todos ellos y sin embargo familiar, cuando se vuelve y abre la barba en una sonrisa amistosa, exigiendo que las mujeres busquen un beso en la oscura cueva de la barba. Joachim se detuvo, la mano en la empuñadura de la espada, como si la proximidad de la banda de la guarnición pudiera infundirle fuerzas y protegerle del mal. Irisada, inquietante era la imagen de Bertrand. Aparecía y desaparecía de nuevo; «desaparecía en las tinieblas de la gran ciudad», pensó Joachim, y las tinieblas tenían notas de un morir infernal. Bertrand se ocultaba en todas las figuras y todas las traicionaba; a él, a los compañeros, a las mujeres, a todos. Ahora se dio cuenta de que el representante de Bertrand había cruzado, sano y salvo, la Spandauer Strasse con un trotecillo. Joachim se sentía feliz de poder sustraer para siempre a Ruzena del poder de estos dos hombres. No, no podía hablarse de robo; al contrario, él tenía también la obligación de interponerse ante Elisabeth para protegerla. Oh, él sabía que el mal es capcioso. Pero un militar no puede huir. Si él huyera, entregaría indefensa a Elisabeth a aquellos tipos, él mismo sería entonces uno de los que se esconden en las tinieblas de la gran ciudad y tienen miedo a los caballos, y esto, no sería solo confesar la culpabilidad del robo, sino que significaría renunciar para siempre a poderle arrancar a ese hombre el secreto de su traición. Tenía que continuar siguiéndole, pero no ocultándose como un espía, sino con la cabeza bien alta, como debe ser, y tampoco piensa seguir ocultando a Ruzena. Y así, en pleno barrio de la Bolsa, a pesar de la proximidad de la banda del regimiento, reinó por fin la paz en torno a Joachim von Pasenow, una paz tan tranquila y transparente como el claro cielo azul que se filtraba por la hendidura de la calle.

Deseaba, no muy clara pero sí perentoriamente, alcanzar al hombre y comunicarle que se llevaría a Ruzena del casino y que a partir de ahora ya no habría secretos; pero apenas había dado unos pasos, cuando el hombre se precipitó anadeando en la Bolsa. Joachim contempló unos instantes la puerta. ¿Era este el lugar de la metamorfosis? ¿Saldría ahora el propio Bertrand? Reflexionó sobre si tendría que ponerlo inmediatamente en contacto con Ruzena y rechazó la idea: Bertrand pertenecía al mundo de los locales nocturnos, y precisamente era este el mundo de donde tenía que arrancar a Ruzena. Pero todo esto ya se vería; lo más hermoso sería ignorarlo y caminar con Ruzena por un parque silencioso y junto a un estanque silencioso. Estaba frente a la Bolsa. Echaba de menos el campo. En torno a él el tráfico rugía; arriba tronaba el ferrocarril urbano. Ya no miraba a los transeúntes, sabía que tenían un aspecto extraño y desagradable. A partir de ahora evitará aquel barrio. Joachim von Pasenow se mantiene erguido y rígido entre el tumulto que rodea la Bolsa. Amará mucho a Ruzena.

Bertrand le hizo una visita de pésame y Joachim se encontró de nuevo ante un dilema: no sabía si debía

considerar esta visita como amabilidad o como impertinencia; se podía interpretar de las dos maneras. Bertrand se acordaba de Helmuth, que de vez en cuando, aunque con poca frecuencia, había acudido a Culm, y era un recuerdo sorprendente: «Sí, un muchacho rubio, silencioso, muy introvertido… creo que nos envidiaba… probablemente no cambió mucho luego… además se parecía mucho a usted». También esto era una confianza excesiva, casi parecía que Bertrand quisiera aprovechar para sí la muerte de Helmuth; por otra parte no tenía nada de extraño que Bertrand recordara con tanta exactitud los sucesos relacionados con su carrera militar: uno recuerda con placer los tiempos de esplendor para siempre perdidos. Pero el tono de Bertrand no era sentimental, sino realista y tranquilo, de modo que la muerte del hermano fue adquiriendo un aspecto más humano y sencillo, y en cierto modo se hizo, en manos de Bertrand, objetiva, intemporal y conciliadora. Joachim, en realidad, no había pensado mucho en el duelo de su hermano; todo cuanto había oído al respecto y lo que se había repetido innumerables veces en todas las manifestaciones de condolencia, iba encaminado en la misma dirección: que Helmuth había sufrido el trágico destino impuesto por un inmutable e ineludible código de honor. Bertrand, en cambio, dijo: «Lo más curioso es que vivimos en un mundo de máquinas y de trenes, y que al mismo tiempo, mientras ruedan los trenes y trabajan las fábricas, dos personas se enfrentan y disparan». Ya no tiene sentido del honor, se dijo Joachim, y, no obstante, la opinión de Bertrand parecía natural y esclarecedora. Pero Bertrand prosiguió:

—Probablemente se debe a que se trata de sentimientos…

—Sentimiento del honor —dijo Joachim.

—Sí, sentimiento del honor y cosas parecidas.

Joachim quedó atónito. ¿Bromeaba Bertrand otra vez? Le hubiera gustado decir que no se podía hablar solamente desde el punto de vista ciudadano; allá en el campo los sentimientos están menos falsificados y significan mucho más. Bertrand no sabía nada de esto; una cosa así no puede decirse a un invitado, y Joachim le ofreció en silencio un cigarro. Pero Bertrand se sacó del bolsillo la pipa inglesa y la bolsa de cuero con tabaco:

—Es curioso que precisamente lo más leve, lo menos duradero, sea en realidad lo más persistente. Físicamente el hombre puede adaptarse con rapidez increíble a nuevas condiciones de vida. Pero incluso la piel y el color del pelo son más persistentes que el esqueleto.

Joachim contempló la piel clara y el pelo excesivamente ondulado de Bertrand y esperó para ver adonde quería ir a parar. Bertrand notó inmediatamente que no se había expresado con suficiente claridad:

—Bueno, lo más persistente en nosotros son los llamados sentimientos. Arrastramos un fondo indestructible de conservadurismo. Son los sentimientos, o, mejor dicho, los convencionalismos del sentimiento, ya que en realidad están muertos y son atávicos.

—¿Usted considera, pues, los principios conservadores como atavismos?

—Oh, a veces sí, no siempre. Aunque en este caso no se trata de eso. Creo que el sentimiento que tenemos de la vida va siempre rezagado, respecto a la vida real, medio siglo o un siglo. El sentimiento es siempre de hecho menos humano que la vida que vivimos. Piense por ejemplo que un Lessing o un Voltaire aceptaron sin rebelarse que en su época se aplicara el suplicio de la rueda, muy bonito tal vez visto desde abajo, pero inimaginable para nuestros sentimientos. ¿Y cree usted que entre nosotros es distinto?

No. Joachim nunca había pensado en aquellas cosas. Probablemente Bertrand tenía razón. Pero ¿por qué le decía a él todas estas cosas? Hablaba como un periodista. Bertrand dijo: —Aceptamos tranquilamente que dos hombres, ambos de seguro honorables, pues su hermano no se habría batido de no ser así, se enfrenten una mañana y disparen a matar. ¡Cuán presos tienen que estar ambos del convencionalismo del sentimiento, y cuánto tenemos que estarlo nosotros, para poder aceptarlo! El sentimiento es apático y por eso es incomprensiblemente cruel. El mundo está dominado por la apatía del sentimiento.

¡Apatía del sentimiento! Joachim se sintió aludido; ¿no sufría él también esta apatía del sentimiento, no era acaso una apatía imperdonable que él careciera de suficiente fantasía como para mantener a Ruzena y sacarla del casino, pese a que ella se opusiera? Consternado, dijo:

—¿Considera usted realmente que el honor obedece a una apatía del sentimiento?

—¡Ay, Pasenow! Formula usted unas preguntas excesivamente unívocas. —Bertrand sonreía ahora con aquella sonrisa triunfalista con que solía superar todas las divergencias—. Yo creo que el honor es un sentimiento muy vivo, pero también estoy convencido de que las formas ya superadas están llenas de apatía y de que hace falta un cansancio infinito para entregarse a un convencionalismo romántico y muerto del sentimiento. Se tiene que estar desesperado, perdido…

Sí, Helmuth estaba cansado. Pero ¿qué pretendía Bertrand? ¿Cómo se podía escapar a este convencionalismo? Joachim sintió con un estremecimiento que, si uno pretendía huir de los convencionalismos, podía caer como Bertrand en lo resbaladizo. Desde luego él en su relación con Ruzena había saltado ya por encima del más severo convencionalismo, pero ahora no podía ir más lejos, y el honor viviente exigía que se quedara junto a Ruzena. Tal vez Helmuth lo había presentido, cuando lo puso en guardia contra su regreso a la hacienda. Porque entonces Ruzena estaría perdida. Preguntó, pues,

repentinamente: «¿Qué opina usted de la agricultura alemana?», esperando casi que Bertrand, que siempre se sacaba razones prácticas de la manga, le disuadiera también, de hacerse cargo de Stolpin.

—Es difícil de contestar, Pasenow, sobre todo cuando uno entiende tan poco de agricultura como yo… todos tenemos aún el prejuicio feudal de que en la tierra de Dios trabajar esta tierra supone asegurarse la más sólida existencia.

Bertrand acompañó sus palabras con un ligero gesto despectivo. Joachim von Pasenow se sintió decepcionado, pero al mismo tiempo contento de pertenecer a la casta de los privilegiados, mientras la insegura existencia comercial de Bertrand solo significaba un estadio previo en vistas a un sistema de vida más sólido. Evidentemente se arrepentiría de haber dejado el regimiento; ¡qué fácil le hubiera sido, como oficial de la guardia, casarse con una hacienda! Pero aquella reflexión era digna de su padre y Joachim la apartó de su mente; solo preguntó a Bertrand si pensaba establecerse más adelante. No, fue la respuesta de Bertrand, probablemente no lo haría, pues no era hombre que pudiera estar mucho tiempo en el mismo sitio. Y hablaron mucho de Stolpin, de las posibilidades que ofrecía de caza, y Joachim invitó a Bertrand a tomar parte en la cacería de otoño. Y de repente sonó la campanilla de la puerta. ¡Ruzena!, pensó Joachim en su interior, y miró a Bertrand casi hostilmente: está sentado ahí desde hace dos horas, tomando té y fumando; esto ya no es una visita de condolencia. Claro que debía reconocer que él mismo le había invitado a sentarse y le había instado a quedarse y le había ofrecido un puro, a pesar de que tenía que saber que vendría Ruzena. Naturalmente ahora, cuando ya había ocurrido, no se podía volver atrás; naturalmente habría sido mejor consultar antes con Ruzena. Tal vez ella se sentiría molesta, tal vez prefería el ocultamiento, que él se disponía a descubrir, tal vez, en su bondad, quería evitar que él se avergonzara por ella, o quizá en realidad no era sociable; Joachim no podía formarse una opinión, porque, cuando la imaginaba, veía solo su cabeza y su cabello suelto en la almohada a su lado, aspiraba la fragancia de su cuerpo, pero apenas recordaba qué aspecto tenía vestida. Pero, en definitiva, Bertrand es un civil, lleva también el pelo excesivamente largo, y todo esto carece de importancia. Por eso dijo: «Oiga, Bertrand, viene a visitarme una dama joven y agradable; ¿puedo pedirle que se quede a cenar con nosotros?». «Oh, qué romántico», respondió Bertrand, naturalmente aceptaba encantado, si no estorbaba.

Joachim salió para recibir a Ruzena y prevenirla respecto a la otra visita. Evidentemente la sorprendió encontrarse con un extraño. Pero estuvo amable con Bertrand y Bertrand estuvo amable con ella. A Joachim no le gustó la forma rutinariamente amistosa con que se trataban. Decidieron comer en casa; enviaron al ordenanza a por vino y jamón, y Ruzena corrió tras él: debía traer también tarta de manzana con nata. Ella era feliz al poder ocuparse en la cocina y preparar un pastel de patata. Más tarde llamó a Joachim a la cocina; él creyó primero que solo quería que la viera con su gran delantal blanco y el cucharón en la mano, y estaba muy predispuesto a acoger con ternura esta imagen casera y cariñosa, pero Ruzena, apoyada en la puerta, lloraba; era casi la misma escena de años atrás: él, un muchacho todavía, había ido a la gran cocina en busca de su madre y allí una de las criadas —tal vez la madre acababa de despedirla— lloraba con tanta amargura que él, de no haberle dado vergüenza, habría llorado con ella. «Ya no me quieres», sollozaba Ruzena aferrada a su cuello, y aunque se besaron con más intensidad que nunca, no se tranquilizaba, «… terminado, lo sé, todo ha terminado…», repetía, «… pero ahora vete, tengo que cocinar». Se secó las lágrimas, sonrió. Pero Joachim se alejó a disgusto, y le incomodaba saber a Bertrand en la habitación; naturalmente el comportamiento de ella era pueril, era pueril creer que todo hubiera terminado a causa de Bertrand, y no obstante se trataba de un certero instinto femenino, puro instinto femenino, no se podía calificar de otro modo, y Joachim sintió oprimírsele el corazón. Pues aunque Bertrand, suficientemente cínico, lo recibió con las palabras «Es encantadora» y despertó en él el orgullo agradecido del rey Kandaule, la amenaza persistía: si él regresaba a Stolpin, entonces Ruzena estaría perdida y entonces todo habría terminado. ¡Si al menos Bertrand lo hubiera prevenido contra la agricultura! ¿O es que quería —tal vez en contra de sus propias convicciones— impulsarlo hacia este oficio solo para alejarlo de Berlín y conseguir de este modo a Ruzena, a la que, a pesar de todo, consideraba de su legítima propiedad? ¡No podía creerlo!

Ruzena, seguida del ordenanza, entró con una gran bandeja. Se había quitado el delantal de cocina y, sentada entre los dos hombres ante la mesita redonda, representaba el papel de gran dama, conversaba en su tono cantarín con Bertrand, al que hacía relatar sus viajes. Las dos ventanas del cuarto estaban abiertas y, a pesar de la oscura noche veraniega del exterior, la suave lámpara de petróleo sobre la mesa recordaba el invierno navideño y la intimidad de las pequeñas viviendas de las trastiendas. Qué extraño que hubiera podido olvidar los pañuelitos de encaje que había comprado para Ruzena aquella noche de indefinible nostalgia. Estaban todavía en el armario y le gustaría dárselos a Ruzena, si Bertrand no estuviera aquí y si ella no escuchara con tanto interés estas historias de las plantaciones de algodón y de los infelices negros, cuyos padres eran todavía esclavos, sí, sí, auténticos esclavos que uno podía vender. ¿Cómo, también las muchachas se vendían? Ruzena se estremeció y Bertrand rió, rió ligera y amablemente: «¡Oh, usted no tiene nada que temer, pequeña esclava, a usted no le ocurrirá nada!». ¿Por qué decía aquello Bertrand? ¿Pretendía acaso comprar a Ruzena o recibirla como regalo? Joachim se vio obligado a pensar en la homofonía de esclavo y eslavo y en que todos los negros se parecen, tanto que apenas es posible

distinguirlos unos de otros, ¡y era de nuevo como si Bertrand quisiera arrastrarlo otra vez en sus elucubraciones, recordarle que Ruzena era idéntica a su hermano italo-eslavo! ¿Era por eso que había traído a colación las huestes de los negros? Pero Bertrand le sonreía amablemente y era rubio, casi tan rubio como Helmuth, aunque no llevaba barba, y llevaba el cabello ondulado, demasiado ondulado, en lugar de rígidamente cepillado, y por unos instantes todo estuvo de nuevo confuso y no se sabía a quién pertenecía legalmente Ruzena. Si la bala le hubiera alcanzado a él, Helmuth estaría ahora aquí en su lugar y Helmuth habría tenido suficiente valor para proteger a Elisabeth. Ruzena habría sido tal vez demasiado poco para Helmuth; sin embargo, él mismo no era más que el representante de su hermano. Joachim se horrorizó al comprenderlo, le horrorizó que una persona pudiera sustituir a otra, que Bertrand tuviera un pequeño representante fofo y barbudo, y que partiendo de ahí se pudieran justificar incluso las opiniones del padre: ¿Por qué precisamente Ruzena, por qué precisamente él? ¿Por qué no, pues, Elisabeth? En cierto modo todo daba ya igual, y comprendió el cansancio que había arrastrado a Helmuth a la muerte. Quizá Ruzena tuviera razón y su amor se acercaba al final, todo se había vuelto de repente muy lejano, y los rostros de Ruzena y de Bertrand se podían distinguir apenas entre sí. Convencionalismo del sentimiento, había dicho Bertrand.

Ruzena en cambio parecía haber olvidado su fatídica profecía. Había buscado la mano de Joachim por debajo de la mesa y cuando él, con el pánico de su buena crianza y mirando de reojo a Bertrand, puso la mano a salvo en el campo abierto e iluminado del mantel, Ruzena se la cogió y la acarició; y Joachim, que con la emoción de sentirse dueño se había puesto contento otra vez, superó con un pequeño esfuerzo su vergüenza y conservó la mano de ella entre las suyas, de modo que quedó bien patente hasta qué punto se pertenecían legítimamente el uno al otro. Y no hacían nada que no fuera justo, pues la Biblia dice: si un hombre muere sin descendencia antes que su hermano, la viuda no debe tomar por esposo a un extraño, sino al hermano. Sí, algo así debía de ser y era absurdo que él pudiera engañar a Helmuth con una mujer. Pero entonces Bertrand golpeó su copa y pronunció un breve brindis, y de nuevo no se sabía si hablaba en serio o en broma o si las pocas copas de champán que había tomado habían sido ya demasiado para él, tan extraordinariamente difícil de entender era su discurso, porque hablaba del ama de casa alemana, que como imitación es encantadora, ya que el juego es la única realidad de esta vida, por eso el arte es siempre más hermoso que el paisaje, un traje de carnaval más atrayente que un auténtico traje, y el hogar de un guerrero alemán no será perfecto hasta que, apartado de lo trivial y unívoco, profanado por un negociante sin tradiciones, no sea santificado de nuevo por la más encantadora de las muchachas bohemias; por esto pide a los presentes que brinden con él a la salud del ama de casa más hermosa. Sí, todo aquello era algo oscuro y reticente y no se sabía si estas alusiones a la imitación y a la copia implicaban de algún modo sus propias ideas sobre el representante, pero como Bertrand, pese a que seguía sonriendo con su peculiar ironía, no había dejado de mirar amistosamente a Ruzena, se sabía que todas sus palabras habían sido un homenaje dirigido a ella y que uno podía descartar oscuras ambigüedades, y la comida terminó alegremente para todos y sin contrariedades.

Después se empeñaron en acompañar a Bertrand hasta la casa de huéspedes donde se alojaba, en parte porque no querían mostrar abiertamente que Ruzena iba a quedarse con Joachim. Ruzena entre los dos, anduvieron por las calles silenciosas, separados los tres, porque Joachim no se atrevía a darle el brazo a Ruzena. Cuando Bertrand hubo desaparecido en el portal, se miraron uno a otro y Ruzena preguntó muy seria y resignada: «¿Me llevas al casino?». El notó con cuánta pena y dificultad había salido esta frase de sus labios, pero solo experimentó una fatigada indiferencia, de modo que estaba casi por responder afirmativamente a la pregunta con su misma seriedad, e incluso habría soportado despedirse ahora de ella para siempre, y si Bertrand hubiera vuelto para llevársela, él también lo habría soportado. Pero la idea del casino era insoportable. Y avergonzado de haber necesitado este estímulo, y no obstante casi feliz, la cogió del brazo sin pronunciar palabra. Aquella noche se amaron más que nunca. Con todo, también aquella vez olvidó Joachim entregarle a Ruzena sus pañuelitos de encaje.

Diariamente, cuando el pequeño coche del correo, tirado por un solo caballo, regresaba del tren de la mañana y pasaba por delante de la oficina del pueblo, el mensajero de la hacienda ya estaba apoyado en la ventanilla; en realidad era solo un mensajero privado, pero perteneciente al inventario de la oficina de correos, convertido en cierto modo en funcionario, tal vez incluso superior de los dos empleados que allí había, no por sus méritos personales, a pesar de que había echado canas en este servicio, sino porque venía de la hacienda y su dignidad era una institución de muchas décadas, que seguramente se remontaba a aquellos tiempos en que no había correos del Estado, sino que una diligencia-correo cruzaba el pueblo, no con demasiada frecuencia, y depositaba la correspondencia en el mesón. La enorme cartera negra, cuyas correas le habían dejado una señal diagonal en los hombros del traje, había sobrevivido a muchos mensajeros y probablemente procedía de aquella época remota y desde luego mejor; porque no había nadie tan viejo en el pueblo que en los más lejanos días de su juventud no hubiera visto la cartera ya colgada en su clavo y al mensajero apoyado en la ventanilla, y todos los viejos recuerdan y son capaces de enumerar a

los mensajeros de la hacienda, que con la marca diagonal en la chaqueta habían recorrido valerosos su camino y reposaban ahora fatigados en el cementerio. Así pues, la cartera era más vieja y más venerable que la moderna oficina de correos, construida en el turbulento año 1848, más vieja que el clavo que se volvió a clavar allí en honor a la cartera o tal vez como último homenaje oficial a los señores de la hacienda, al construirse la oficina postal, tal vez también como advertencia de que no deben olvidarse las viejas tradiciones pese al ímpetu del progreso. Porque también en la nueva oficina persistía la vieja costumbre de ocuparse en primer lugar de la correspondencia de los señores de la hacienda, y probablemente sigue subsistiendo todavía hoy: en cuanto llegaba el cochero con su saco postal gris pardo y lo echaba, con el característico gesto despectivo que merece un saco postal a los ojos de un cochero ordinario, sobre el gastado mostrador, el jefe de correos, que sabe mucho más de la dignidad humana y de las instituciones burocráticas, suelta con solemnidad apenas disimulada el precinto y los cordones, y clasifica por tamaños todo lo que está mezclado, a fin de poderlo examinar y distribuir más cómodamente; una vez concedida la debida atención al orden, lo primero que hacía el jefe de correos, dejando a un lado todo lo demás, era separar la correspondencia de la hacienda, coger una llave del cajón de la mesa y dirigirse a la cartera colgada que, con su abrazadera de latón, contempla silenciosa aquellas operaciones; el jefe de correos la abre por el centro de la abrazadera y ella le muestra desvergonzada su forro de lona gris, y aprisa, como si no pudiera soportar la visión de estas fauces de tela, desliza en su interior las cartas y los periódicos e incluso los pequeños paquetes, da un golpecito a la quijada inferior de estas fauces para que se cierren de nuevo, cierra a su vez los labios de latón y guarda otra vez la llave en la mesa. Pero el mensajero, que hasta ahora solo era espectador, se la cuelga al hombro con las viejas y resquebrajadas correas, coge los paquetes más grandes en la mano y de este modo lleva los envíos a la hacienda una o dos horas antes de lo que podría hacerlo el cartero oficial, que primero habría tenido que recorrer todo el pueblo; un reparto fuera de lo usual y muy rápido, que demuestra que la institución del mensajero de la hacienda con su cartera no es solo la continuación de una hermosa y vieja tradición, sino que responde a las necesidades prácticas de los señores y de la gente de la hacienda.

Joachim recibe con más frecuencia que antes noticias de su casa; casi siempre el padre solo escribía breves comunicaciones con aquella letra semiinclinada, que recordaba tanto su manera de andar: casi se habría podido decir que era una escritura de tres pies. Joachim se enteraba de las visitas que recibían sus padres, de las incidencias de la caza y las previsiones para el otoño, algo también acerca de las cosechas, y casi siempre terminaba este parte agrícola: «Sería conveniente que empezaras pronto los preparativos de tu traslado, pues lo más sensato sería que te familiarizaras cuanto antes con el trabajo y todo necesita su tiempo. Tu fiel padre». Joachim, como siempre, experimentaba una profunda aversión por la letra y leía las cartas quizá con menor atención y mayor enojo que nunca, ya que toda exhortación a abandonar su carrera militar y a trasladarse al hogar era como un arrastrarlo a lo civil e inconsistente, algo muy parecido a quererle despojar de sus defensas y arrojarlo desnudo en las cercanías de la Alexanderplatz para que todos aquellos hombres extraños y atareados pudieran burlarse de él. Alguien podía calificarlo de apatía del sentimiento: no, él no era cobarde y se mantendría tranquilo frente a la pistola del adversario o iría al campo de batalla a luchar contra el hereditario enemigo francés, pero los peligros de la vida civil eran de naturaleza extraña y oscura, inconcebible. Allí todo estaba en desorden, sin jerarquías, sin disciplina e incluso sin puntualidad. Cuando de camino entre su casa y el cuartel, pasaba por delante de las fábricas de máquinas Borsig a la hora de entrada o de salida del trabajo y los obreros estaban delante de la puerta como un pueblo exótico y oxidado, muy semejante al pueblo de Bohemia, él sentía sobre sí sus miradas inquietantes y, si alguno se llevaba la mano a la negra gorra de cuero para saludarle, no se atrevía a corresponder, por temor a marcar al amable como desertor, ya que simpatizaba con él. Porque sentía el odio de los otros como algo justo, y también porque presentía que odiarían a Bertrand tanto como a él, pese a su traje de civil. En la aversión de Ruzena por Bertrand se ocultaba también algo parecido. Todo esto era opresivo y caótico, y para Joachim era como si su barco tuviera una vía de agua y le obligaran a ensancharla. Pero también parecía totalmente absurdo que el padre le exigiera dejar el servicio a causa de Elisabeth; si había algo que pudiera hacer a un pretendiente digno de ella, era que este, al menos en su traje, se apartara de toda impureza y desorden; robarle a él el uniforme significaba degradar a Elisabeth. Así pues, descartó la idea del retorno a la casa paterna y a la vida civil como una exigencia impertinente y peligrosa, pero, a fin de no desobedecer totalmente al padre, se presentó con flores en la estación cuando Elisabeth y su madre se fueron a Lestow de veraneo.

El revisor se cuadró ante el tren que aguardaba en cuanto vio a Joachim, y se estableció un tácito entendimiento entre los dos hombres, entendimiento en la mirada del valiente suboficial, que tomaba bajo su protección a las damas del superior. Y aunque iba un poco contra los convencionalismos dejar a la baronesa, ya instalada en el compartimiento con su equipaje y su dama de compañía, Joachim encontró encantadora la propuesta de Elisabeth de pasear a lo largo del tren hasta que dieran la señal de salida. Anduvieron arriba y abajo por la tierra apisonada que separa las vías y, cada vez que pasaban por delante

de la puerta abierta del compartimiento, Joachim no dejaba de saludar con una leve inclinación hacia arriba, mientras la baronesa sonreía hacia abajo. Pero Elisabeth decía lo mucho que se alegraba de ir a la casa paterna y que contaba con ver frecuentemente a Joachim en Lestow, ya que como siempre, y mayormente en aquel año tan triste, él pasaría sus vacaciones en casa de sus padres. Llevaba un ajustado traje de chaqueta, de una fina tela gris, y el velo azul del sombrerito entonaba bien con el color del traje. Era casi sorprendente que una persona con una expresión tan seria se preocupara de sus trajes y tuviera tan buen gusto, especialmente cuando uno sospechaba que el gris del traje y el azul del velo podían haber sido elegidos de acuerdo con el color de los ojos, que oscilaban entre un gris serio y un alegre azul. Pero era muy difícil plasmar estos pensamientos en palabras adecuadas, y Joachim se alegró de que sonara la señal y el revisor rogara a los pasajeros que volvieran al tren. Elisabeth subió al estribo y, continuando la conversación, supo evitar hábilmente con el busto vuelto hacia atrás el feo aspecto de una dama que se encarama encogida al compartimiento; solo en el último escalón, no pudo continuar con el cuerpo ladeado y entró resuelta por la baja portezuela. Joachim permaneció ante el vagón con la cabeza levantada, y el recuerdo de su padre, con quien no hacía mucho había hablado en aquel mismo lugar, se mezcló tan extrañamente con la imagen de los faldones de la chaqueta de Elisabeth y con el proyecto de boda, que su padre había propuesto entonces en forma tan odiosa, que el nombre de esta muchacha de ojos zarco-grises y chaqueta gris, por más que la viera físicamente ante él en la puerta del vagón, se volvió de pronto indiferente y olvidado, sumergido extraña y desagradablemente en la sorprendida indignación de que hubiera hombres como su padre, que en su abyección tuvieran la osadía de asignar un ser virginal para toda la vida a la degradación y contaminación de cualquier hombre. Pero por más que hubiera reconocido en ella a la mujer en el momento de su resuelta entrada en el vagón, reconoció al mismo tiempo dolorosamente que no podía esperar de ella la dulzura de las noches de Ruzena, ni su anhelante entrega y aceptación, sino que sería un dejar hacer grave, tal vez religioso, inimaginable, no solo porque tenía que producirse sin traje de chaqueta y sin uniforme, sino inimaginable también porque la comparación con Ruzena, a la que él había salvado del contacto y envilecimiento de los hombres, parecía casi un sacrilegio. La señal sonó por tercera vez y, mientras él seguía en el andén saludando ligeramente, las señoras hacían ondear sus pañuelos de encaje, hasta que al final solo se vieron dos puntitos blancos y una línea de suave nostalgia se atrevió a salir del corazón de Joachim, nació en el corazón de Joachim un amago de ternura que se extendió y alcanzó los puntitos blancos en el último instante, antes de que desaparecieran en la lejanía.

Saludado militarmente por el portero y los empleados, Joachim salió de la estación y se encontró en la Küstrinplatz. La plaza yacía solitaria y un poco abandonada, oscura aunque en todas partes estuviera inundada de sol, un sol prestado, porque el auténtico brillaba sobre los campos dorados. Y aunque todo esto solo de forma difícilmente explicable recordaba a Ruzena, era evidente que Ruzena, extrañamente inundada de sol y sin embargo oscura y un poco abandonada, estaba tan íntimamente unida a Berlín como Elisabeth a los campos que ahora atravesaba y a la casa señorial emplazada en el parque. Era un orden limpio y tranquilizador. Sin embargo, estaba contento de haber arrancado a Ruzena de su oscura profesión de animadora y de su falsa luminosidad, contento de estar a punto de liberarla del ovillo de hilos tendidos sobre toda aquella ciudad, de esa red que él sentía en todas partes, en la Alexanderplatz y en la fábrica de herrumbrosa maquinaria y en el suburbio proletario con el sótano de la verdulería, una impenetrable e intangible red de vida civil, que era invisible y sin embargo lo oscurecía todo. Era preciso liberar a Ruzena de aquel laberinto, y mostrarse así digno de Elisabeth. Pero todo aquello no era más que un deseo muy confuso, un deseo que ni él mismo quería ver claro, porque probablemente le habría parecido absurdo.

Eduard von Bertrand, que se disponía a extender sus negocios por la región industrial de Bohemia, se acordó de Ruzena en Praga, sintió en cierto modo su añoranza de la patria y quiso decirle algo amable para consolarla. Y como no sabía la dirección de Ruzena, escribió a Pasenow que recordaba agradecido la última noche que habían pasado juntos y que esperaba con placer verle en Berlín en su viaje de regreso a Hamburgo, añadió un cariñoso saludo para Ruzena y alabó la hermosura de su país natal. Después callejeó por la ciudad.

Tras aquella noche con Bertrand y Ruzena, Pasenow esperaba que ocurriera algo especial y solemne, tal vez incluso algo horrible; por ejemplo, que Bertrand le pagara con la misma moneda la distinción y la confianza de que le hizo objeto al incluirle en la velada, aunque tampoco quedaba fuera del límite de lo posible un rapto de Ruzena; los comerciantes carecen de conciencia. Pero cuando no ocurrió lo uno ni lo otro, sino que Bertrand partió en silencio de acuerdo con su programa y no dio señales de vida, Joachim se sintió ofendido. Entonces llegó inesperadamente la nota de Praga; se la enseñó a Ruzena: «Parece que has causado profunda impresión en Bertrand», dijo meditabundo. Ruzena frunció el ceño: «Vaya, pues a mí no me gusta tu amigo, es hombre feo». Joachim defendió a Bertrand; no era feo. «No sé, no gustó a mí, dice cosas», decidió Ruzena, «no tiene que volver.» En eso estaba Joachim totalmente de acuerdo, aunque ahora lo hubiera necesitado con urgencia, tanto más cuanto que Ruzena añadió: «Mañana voy a escuela de teatro».

Él sabía que ella no iría si él no la llevaba, claro que no, pero ¿cómo podía llevarla? ¿Cómo hacer una cosa así? Ruzena quería a toda costa «trabajar» en algo y los planes sobre nuevas actividades originaron un nuevo tema de conversación con el encanto de una desacostumbrada seriedad, aunque Joachim estaba totalmente desvalido ante casi todas las preguntas formuladas. Tal vez temía que una profesión burguesa le robara aquella gracia exótica con la que oscilaba entre dos mundos y la arrastrara de nuevo a la barbarie, y precisamente por eso su fantasía llegaba solo hasta la profesión teatral, y Ruzena, llena de entusiasmo, estaba completamente de acuerdo: «Verás, como será yo famosa, tú me querrás». Pero había que recorrer antes un largo camino y nada sucedió. Bertrand había hablado una vez de la indolencia vegetativa en que vive la mayoría de los hombres; era seguramente algo parecido a la apatía del sentimiento. Sí, de estar Bertrand aquí, quizá podría con su mundología y su experiencia práctica ser de mucha ayuda. Y así, cuando Bertrand llegó a Berlín, encontró una premiosa invitación de Pasenow en respuesta a sus cordiales saludos.

Podría hacerse, opinó Bertrand con gran sorpresa de los dos, podría hacerse, pero no debían creer que el teatro era una carrera de gran porvenir o una carrera fácil. Por otra parte, él tenía mejores relaciones en Hamburgo, pero lo intentaría gustoso allí. Y entonces los hechos se sucedieron con más rapidez de lo previsto; ya a los pocos días Ruzena fue convocada para una prueba de canto, que superó bastante bien, y poco después fue contratada como corista. La sospecha de Joachim de que la pronta amabilidad de Bertrand estuviera relacionada con sus intenciones respecto a Ruzena se desvaneció ante la actitud amistoso-indiferente, casi podría decirse médica, de Bertrand. Sin duda todo hubiera estado más claro si Bertrand hubiera aprovechado las molestias que se tomó por Ruzena para manifestarle su amor. En el fondo Joachim estaba seriamente molesto con Bertrand, pues este, que había pasado tres veladas con él y con Ruzena y había charlado sobre montones de cosas, pero no había soltado prenda sobre sí mismo, ni había abandonado la amable reserva que le era tan propia, seguía siendo un extraño, que además había hecho por Ruzena mucho más que él mismo en la apatía de su fantasía romántica. Resultaba muy penoso. ¿Qué pretendía el tal Bertrand? Ahora, mientras se despedía y, naturalmente, rechazaba todo agradecimiento, incluso de Ruzena, manifestó de nuevo el deseo de volver a ver pronto a Joachim von Pasenow. ¿Por qué quería verle de nuevo? ¿No era una hipocresía? Y Joachim, sin comprenderse a sí mismo, dijo: «Bertrand, cuando vuelva usted a Berlín, será difícil que me encuentre, porque después de las maniobras iré unas semanas a Stolpin. Pero si usted quiere realmente hacerme una visita allí, me alegraría mucho». Y Bertrand aceptó.

El señor Von Pasenow había tenido siempre la costumbre de esperar la correspondencia en su habitación. Encima de la mesa, junto al montón de periódicos de caza, había, desde tiempo inmemorial, un sitio libre donde el mensajero depositaba diariamente su cartera. Y aunque el producto generalmente no valía la pena y a menudo consistía solo en un par de periódicos, el señor Von Pasenow cogía siempre con idéntica avidez la llave que tenía colgada de un cuerno de ciervo y abría la abrazadera amarilla de la negra cartera. Y mientras el mensajero aguarda en silencio con la gorra en la mano y mirando al suelo, el señor Von Pasenow toma la correspondencia y se sienta en su escritorio, separa primero la suya y la de su familia y, tras haber examinado escrupulosamente las direcciones de las demás, las entrega al mensajero para que las distribuya entre la gente de la casa. A veces tenía que dominarse para no abrir una u otra carta dirigida a las criadas, ya que aquello le parecía un natural *jus primae noctis* del señor, y que el secreto de la correspondencia valiera también para los inferiores era una disposición moderna que le chocaba. De todos modos entre los criados se criticaba incluso este examen exterior de las cartas, especialmente porque el señor se atrevía después a preguntar por el contenido de las cartas o a bromear con las sirvientas. Esto había motivado graves conflictos, que habían terminado empero con un despido, de modo que los rebeldes no se sublevaban ya abiertamente, sino que iban personalmente a correos a recoger sus cartas o pedían en secreto al jefe de correos que se las hiciera llegar por medio del cartero oficial. Incluso durante un tiempo se había visto al difunto señorito apearse del caballo todos los días frente a correos para recoger en mano su correspondencia; es posible que por aquel entonces esperara cartas de mujer, que quisiera guardar de las miradas del viejo, o que hiciera negocios que deseaba mantener en secreto; pero el jefe de correos, que de ordinario no guardaba para sí sus observaciones, fue incapaz de adivinar si se trataba de lo uno o de lo otro, pues la escasa correspondencia que recibía Helmuth von Pasenow no permitía sacar conclusiones. Sin embargo, corrió el insistente rumor de que el viejo, a través de alguna maquinación con el correo, había destruido una boda y la felicidad de su hijo. Especialmente las mujeres de la hacienda y del pueblo se aferraron a esta creencia, y tal vez no les faltara razón, ya que Helmuth pareció cada vez más indiferente y más cansado, interrumpió pronto sus idas a caballo al pueblo y se dejó mandar de nuevo la correspondencia en la gran cartera hasta la hacienda y hasta la mesa del padre.

El señor Von Pasenow había conservado su pasión por el correo y no era de extrañar que tal vez se le hubiera acrecentado. Organizaba su paseo matinal a pie o a caballo de forma que tuviera que encontrarse con el mensajero, y entonces podía constatarse que no había dejado la llavecita de la cartera colgada del cuerno de ciervo, sino que la llevaba consigo, a fin de poder abrir la cartera en pleno campo. Allí echaba

una rápida ojeada a las cartas, pero las depositaba de nuevo en la cartera, para no anular el ritual doméstico que se realizaba más tarde en la forma acostumbrada. Una mañana, no obstante, había llegado hasta correos, donde el mensajero estaba aún apoyado en la ventanilla, y había esperado que vaciaran el saco postal sobre el gastado mostrador, y entonces había revisado y clasificado las cartas juntamente con el jefe de correos. Cuando el mensajero contó este hecho tan notable en la hacienda, la señorita Agnes, conocida en todas partes por su mordacidad, opinó: «Ahora empieza ya a desconfiar de sí mismo». Naturalmente esta afirmación carecía de un fundamento razonable, y la obstinación con que ella, más que nadie, hacía responsable de la muerte del hijo al señor de la hacienda, era tal vez consecuencia tardía del rencor que guardó en su corazón desde los años en que, joven y de buen ver, tuvo que soportar las bromas del viejo a propósito de su correspondencia.

No, el señor Von Pasenow se había ocupado siempre del correo y lo que hacía ahora no podía sorprender a nadie. Tampoco era de extrañar que el pastor fuera invitado ahora con más frecuencia a cenar y que el señor Von Pasenow en sus paseos fuera alguna vez a la rectoría. No, no tenía nada de sorprendente, y el pastor lo consideraba un fruto del consuelo espiritual que le había brindado. Solo el señor Von Pasenow sabía que iba a ver al pastor por una razón recóndita e inexplicable, pese a que el pastor no era de su agrado, una vaga esperanza de que aquellos labios que predicaban en la iglesia le comunicaran algo que él esperaba y que, pese al temor de no encontrarlo nunca, no se atrevía siquiera a nombrar. Cuando el pastor hablaba de Helmuth, el señor Von Pasenow decía a veces: «Qué más da…» y cambiaba de tema, ante su propia sorpresa, como huyendo, como si tuviera miedo de lo desconocido, pese a que lo invocaba. Pero a veces había días en que toleraba que lo desconocido se le acercara, y entonces era como un juego al que había jugado de niño: se escondía un anillo dejándolo a la vista, colgándolo, por ejemplo, de una lámpara o de una llave, y cuando los que buscaban se alejaban se decía «frío» y cuando se acercaban al objeto escondido se decía «caliente» o incluso «te quemas». Por eso era lógico que el señor Von Pasenow dijera de improviso clara y fuertemente «quema, quema» y casi batiera palmas, cuando el pastor habló otra vez de Helmuth. El pastor admitió amablemente que había hecho mucho calor durante el día, y el señor Von Pasenow volvió a la realidad. Era, sin embargo, muy curioso que las cosas estuvieran tan cerca unas de otras: se creía estar todavía metido en un juego infantil y de pronto aparecía la muerte en medio del juego. «Sí, sí, hace mucho calor», dijo el señor Von Pasenow, pero parecía estar temblando de frío, «en noches tan ardientes arden los graneros con suma facilidad.»

La idea del calor lo persiguió también durante la cena: «En Berlín debe de hacer ahora un calor agobiante. Joachim no escribe nada acerca de esto… claro que ¡escribe tan poco!». El pastor aludió a las exigencias del servicio. «¿Qué servicio?», preguntó ásperamente el señor Von Pasenow, y el pastor, confuso, no supo qué responder. La señora Von Pasenow aclaró que el pastor quería decir que el servicio de Joachim no le dejaba tiempo libre para escribir, especialmente ahora con las maniobras. «En tal caso debe dejar el servicio», refunfuñó el señor Von Pasenow. Después bebió varios vasos de vino uno tras otro y declaró que se sentía mejor; llenó el vaso del pastor: «Beba, reverendo, beba. Cuando uno bebe, entra en calor, y cuando uno ve doble, está menos solo». «Aquel que está con Dios nunca está solo, señor Von Pasenow», replicó el pastor, y el señor Von Pasenow consideró esta respuesta como un reproche y una falta de tacto. ¿No había dado él siempre a Dios lo que es de Dios y al César, mejor dicho, al rey, lo que le correspondía?: un hijo está al servicio del rey y no escribe, y al otro se lo ha llevado Dios y alrededor todo está vacío y frío. Sí, al pastor le era fácil hablar con altanería; tenía la casa llena, demasiado llena para su situación y ahora esperaba algo más. En su caso era fácil estar con Dios. Le hubiera gustado decírselo al reverendo, pero no podía enemistarse con él, porque quién le quedaría, si nadie quería saber nada de él, excepto… mas la idea ya casi visible desapareció, se escondió, y el señor Von Pasenow dijo dulce y soñador: «En el establo de las vacas hace calor». La señora Von Pasenow miró asustada a su marido: ¿habría bebido el vino demasiado aprisa? Pero el señor Von Pasenow se había levantado y escuchaba por la ventana; si la lámpara no hubiera alumbrado solamente la mesa, la señora Von Pasenow habría visto una expresión asustada y expectante en su rostro, expresión que desapareció cuando se oyeron los pasos del vigilante sobre la gravilla. El señor Von Pasenow se acercó a la ventana, se inclinó hacia fuera y gritó: «Jürgen». Y cuando el pesado paso de Jürgen se detuvo ante la ventana, el señor Von Pasenow le ordenó que cuidara de los graneros, «hace justamente doce años, en una noche cálida como esta, se nos quemó el granero grande en la alquería».

Y cuando Jürgen recuerda obediente lo ocurrido y dice «No hay cuidado», todo regresa para la señora Von Pasenow al ámbito de lo habitual y rutinario, de modo que tampoco le llama la atención que el señor Von Pasenow les dé las buenas noches, para escribir todavía una carta que tiene que salir en el correo de la mañana. Ya en la puerta se volvió: «Dígame, reverendo, ¿por qué tenemos hijos? Usted ha de saberlo, tiene mucha práctica». Y se alejó rápido con una risita, pero un poco como un perro que anduviera en tres patas.

A solas con el pastor, la señora Von Pasenow dijo: «Soy feliz cuando le veo de mejor humor. Desde que murió nuestro pobre Helmuth, está siempre muy abatido».

Agosto tocaba a su fin y las puertas del teatro se abrieron de nuevo. Ruzena tenía ahora tarjetas de

visita, que la presentaban como actriz, y Joachim debía ir a la Alta Franconia de maniobras. Estaba molesto con Bertrand, porque había metido a Ruzena en una profesión que, en definitiva, tenía tan mala fama como las actividades que desempeñaba en el Jägerkasino. Naturalmente había que culpar también a la propia Ruzena, que había caído en esta profesión, o quizá más a su madre, que no había sabido velar mejor por su hija. Pero parecía que Bertrand había destruido de nuevo aquello que él había pretendido arreglar. Tal vez ahora era incluso peor que antes. Porque en el casino estaba todo muy claro, solo había un sí o un no; en cambio entre bastidores reinaba un ambiente muy especial; allí había agasajos y flores, y quizá en ningún otro lugar se le hacía tan difícil a una muchacha seguir siendo honesta. Era cosa sabida. Significaba hundirse más y más, pero Ruzena no quería entenderlo, se sentía incluso orgullosa de su nueva profesión y de sus tarjetas de visita. Contaba con entusiasmo las experiencias de entre bastidores y los chismes del teatro, que él no quería oír; y en el crepúsculo de su vida en común se filtraban continuamente las luces de las candilejas. ¡Cómo había podido creer que se encontraría en ella, o que ella le pertenecía, si la había perdido de antemano! La buscaba todavía, pero el teatro se erguía como una amenaza entre los dos y, cuando Ruzena contaba excitada las aventuras amorosas de sus compañeras, él veía allí el peligro de que la ambición de Ruzena se despertara y de que se inclinara a imitarlas, veía el regreso de Ruzena a una vida anterior, que tal vez no habría podido desarrollarse de manera muy distinta, ya que el ser humano tiende siempre a volver a su punto de partida. Felicidad tronchada de la indolencia crepuscular, dulzura perdida de la tristeza que, si bien oprime el corazón y hace brotar las lágrimas, lleva en sí el resplandor del eterno abismarse.

Y aparecieron de nuevo aquellas quimeras de las que creía haberse librado, y aunque ya no sentía la necesidad de buscar en el rostro de Ruzena los rasgos de su hermano italiano, los veía impresos de modo aún más angustioso, impresos como los rasgos imborrables de aquella vida de la que no podía arrancarla. Y de nuevo se despertó el recelo de que Bertrand era el culpable de estas quimeras, de que él lo había planeado todo, de que como Mefistófeles quería exterminarlo todo, sin excluir siquiera a Ruzena. A todo esto se sumaron las maniobras. ¿Cómo encontraría a Ruzena a su regreso? ¿La encontraría siquiera? Se prometieron escribirse con frecuencia, diariamente; pero Ruzena tenía muchas dificultades en escribir en alemán, y como además ella estaba orgullosa de sus tarjetas y él no se atrevía a destruir esta alegría infantil, el correo le trajo a menudo solo una de esas tarjetas con la odiada inscripción «actriz», y en la tarjeta se leía «Te envía muchos besuquitos», expresión que parecía profanar la dulzura de sus besos. Sin embargo, se sentía muy inquieto cuando pasaban días sin recibir noticias, aunque debía reconocer que la movilidad de la vida en campaña justificaba los retrasos postales; y estaba muy contento cuando llegaba una de las odiosas tarjetitas. Y de repente, inesperadamente, se le ocurrió como un recuerdo que también Bertrand era una especie de actor.

Pero Ruzena le echaba de menos. Las cartas de Joachim describían la vida de maniobras y las noches en los pueblecitos, de las que él disfrutaría de veras «si tú, querida pequeña, dulce Ruzena, estuvieras a mi lado». Y cuando él le pedía que a las nueve de la noche, a la misma hora que él, mirase la luna, a fin de que sus miradas se encontrasen allá arriba, ella salía por la puerta del escenario durante el descanso y miraba obediente hacia lo alto, aunque el entreacto era a las nueve y media. Era como si aquella tarde de primavera bajo la lluvia la mantuviera todavía presa, como si hubiera paralizado algo en su interior; la marea que entonces la había envuelto tenía un lento reflujo y, aunque la voluntad de la muchacha no era lo bastante fuerte y tampoco había posibilidad de erigir diques para retener la corriente, el aire que respiraba seguía impregnado de una suave humedad. Claro que envidiaba un poco a las compañeras que recibían flores en el camerino, pero en realidad lo lamentaba solo por Joachim, para quien ella hubiera deseado como amante una diva famosa. Y aunque una mujer enamorada irradia a menudo a su alrededor ciertas ráfagas de erotismo, que son para muchos el atractivo más delicado, los hombres que galanteaban a las actrices eran de otro estilo e incapaces de percibir tales sutilezas. Y así ocurrió que Joachim, al volver a Berlín de las maniobras, encontró a una Ruzena más intacta que nunca, y ambos lo consideraron una victoria, a la que sin embargo sabían que seguiría la derrota, pero no querían saberlo y cerraron las puertas a este conocimiento con sus abrazos.

Cuando el tren salió de la estación y ella acabó de despedirse agitando el pañuelo de encaje, Elisabeth intentó aclarar si amaba a Joachim. Fue casi alegre y tranquilizador que aquel sentimiento que pretendía calificar de amor surgiera tan cauteloso y civilizado; para notar su presencia era preciso concentrarse profundamente, porque era una imagen tan tenue y sutil que solo podía percibirse sobre un fondo de aburrimiento plateado. Y los suaves contornos de esta imagen se desdibujaron, porque el aburrimiento se fue transformando en impaciencia, a medida que se acercaban a la casa paterna; y como el barón las esperaba en la estación con los nuevos caballos y, al llegar a Lestow, surgió la naturaleza con las verdes copas del parque, en primer término el portón en su pacífica pesadez, brindando la primera sorpresa, porque a derecha e izquierda de la entrada del parque habían construido dos nuevas casitas para los guardas, de modo que las damas lanzaron exclamaciones de entusiasmo, y esto fue solo el preludio de lo

mucho que les quedaba por ver y vivir en los próximos días, es muy comprensible que Elisabeth no pensara ya más en el amor. El barón había aprovechado de nuevo la ausencia de sus dos damas o, como decía a veces para orgullo de Elisabeth, de sus dos mujeres, para introducir en la casa diversas mejoras y embellecimientos, que encantaron a Elisabeth y a su madre e hicieron al barón acreedor de toda suerte de elogios y tierno agradecimiento. Podían sentirse orgullosas de los conocimientos artísticos de papá, que no respetaba excesivamente lo antiguo y había agregado toda clase de adornos a la vieja casa señorial, aunque sin limitarse a lo arquitectónico, sino teniendo bien presente que siempre hay en las paredes espacio para un nuevo cuadro, un rincón que puede embellecerse con un pesado jarrón, un aparador que requiere un tapete de terciopelo bordado en oro, y él era el hombre que se ocupaba de esto. Desde su boda el barón y la baronesa se habían convertido en coleccionistas y las continuas mejoras de su hogar fueron la prolongación de su noviazgo, incluso después del nacimiento de la hija. A Elisabeth no se le ocultaba que la pasión de sus padres por celebrar con regalos las diversas festividades del año, por festejar los cumpleaños y prepararse siempre nuevas sorpresas encerraba un significado más profundo y tenía una honda aunque difícilmente inteligible relación con la alegría, casi podría decirse obsesión, de rodearse siempre de nuevos objetos; Elisabeth no sabía que todo coleccionista, en su intento del absoluto nunca alcanzado, nunca alcanzable, pero siempre perseguido de una colección sin fallos, lo sobrepasa y va hasta lo infinito, y que, fundiéndose en su colección, confía en alcanzar su propio absoluto y la revocación de su muerte. Elisabeth no lo sabía, pero rodeada de todos aquellos objetos bellos y muertos, que se amontonaban a su alrededor, rodeada de tantos hermosos cuadros, intuía sin embargo que los cuadros colgaban de las paredes como para reforzar los muros, y le parecía que todas las cosas muertas salvaguardaban algo muy vivo, algo que tal vez encubrían y protegían, algo a lo que ella misma estaba tan unida que a veces pensaba, al ver un cuadro nuevo, que se trataba de un hermano pequeño, de algo que buscaba protección y que los padres protegían, como si de ello dependiera su existencia en común: presentía el miedo que había detrás y que pretendía acallar lo cotidiano, el envejecer, a base de festejos, miedo que necesitaba convencerse continuamente —sorpresa siempre nueva— de que seguían vivos, de que habían nacido, de que estaban definitivamente unidos y su círculo para siempre cerrado. Y como el barón introducía cada vez nuevas franjas de su tierra en el parque, cuyo centro espeso y oscuro estaba rodeado casi por todas partes de amplias superficies de árboles jóvenes, claras y amigas, le parecía a Elisabeth que él quería, con una solicitud casi femenina, convertir sus vidas en un parque cada vez más grande y amurallado, lleno de agradables zonas para el descanso, y que no llegaría a la meta ni se liberaría de su angustia hasta que el parque se hubiera extendido por toda la tierra, siendo su propia meta ser un parque, por el que Elisabeth paseara eternamente. A veces algo se rebelaba en ella contra esta dulce e implacable obligación, pero como la rebeldía no se manifestaba casi nunca claramente, se fundía con los contornos soleados de las colinas, que emergían más allá de los muros del parque.

«Oh», exclamó la baronesa cuando vieron la nueva pérgola en la rosaleda, «es un encanto: como creada para unos novios.» La baronesa sonreía a Elisabeth y también el padre sonreía, pero en los ojos de ambos se leía claramente el miedo ante lo que les amenazaba, ante lo ineludible, el desamparo, el conocimiento de una infidelidad y una traición, pero se leía también el perdón previo, ya que ellos mismos habían pecado. Era muy triste que solo el pensar en aquel futuro matrimonio deprimiera a los padres, y Elisabeth apartaba toda idea de boda lejos de sí, tan lejos que casi le estaba de nuevo permitido escuchar complacida cómo hablaban los padres de una posible unión, casi como un asentimiento al destino amoroso de la hija, casi como un reconocimiento que elevaba a la hija a la esfera de los adultos, la convertía casi en una hermana de la madre, y por eso se acordó también Elisabeth del día de la boda de tía Brigitte, cuando la madre imprimió en su mejilla un tierno beso y ella vio en este beso una despedida, porque la madre había besado así a su hermana, la había besado entre lágrimas, entre lágrimas, aunque todos afirmaban que eran muy felices y que estaban encantados con el nuevo tío. Pero de esto, naturalmente, hacía mucho tiempo; era pueril recordarlo y Elisabeth, entre sus padres, les pasó los brazos por los hombros y caminó con ellos hacia el cenador que ocupaba el centro de la pérgola, donde se sentaron. Los parterres de rosas, separados por estrechos caminitos simétricamente serpenteantes, estallaban multicolores y llenos de perfume, pero las sombras no habían desaparecido todavía y el barón dijo tristemente señalando un grupo de rosales: «Y allí intenté plantar unas rosas Manetti, pero nuestro clima parece ser demasiado riguroso para ellas», y como si quisiera retener a su hija con esta promesa, añadió: «Pero si da resultado y crecen, serán de Elisabeth». Elisabeth notó la presión de su mano y creyó vislumbrar que existía algo que ellos no podían mantener lo bastante encerrado, algo que tal vez podía ser el tiempo, acumulado y comprimido como un muelle de reloj, y que amenazaba con saltar, crecía entre los dedos, se hacía cada vez más largo, una cinta larga, delgada, blanca, angustiosa, que empezaba a arrastrarse e intentaba apoderarse de ellos como una serpiente maligna, de modo que uno se volvía gordo, viejo y horrible. Quizá la madre lo sentía también, porque dijo: «Cuando la niña se separe de nosotros, nos sentaremos aquí solos». Y Elisabeth, consciente de su culpa, dijo: «Pero si yo me quedaré siempre con vosotros». Lo dijo consciente de su culpa y avergonzada, porque ni ella misma lo creía, y sin embargo sonaba como la renovación de un antiguo voto. «Por otra parte, no veo por qué no podría vivir a nuestro lado con su marido», propuso la baronesa, y el padre alejó la cuestión: «Hasta

entonces queda aún mucho tiempo». Y Elisabeth se acordó otra vez de tía Brigitte, que vivía en Würbendorf, y había engordado mucho, regañaba a sus hijos y tenía ya tan poco en común con la figura graciosa de antaño, que uno apenas podía comprender cómo había sucedido y casi sentía vergüenza por la felicidad que antes irradiaba su presencia. Y Würbendorf es más claro y alegre que Stolpin y todos se habían alegrado de encontrar en tío Albert a un nuevo pariente joven. Era muy posible que Elisabeth ni siquiera hubiera querido tanto a tía Brigitte, sino que aquellos hechos hubieran llegado a ser tan excitantes y tiernos precisamente por significar la incorporación de un nuevo miembro en la familia. Si uno estuviera emparentado con todos los hombres, el mundo sería como un parque bien cuidado, y conseguir un nuevo pariente equivaldría a plantar una nueva clase de rosas en el jardín. La infidelidad y la traición serían entonces delitos leves: ya en aquella ocasión lo había notado, cuando se alegró tanto por el tío Albert, y tal vez en el mar de la injusticia cometida contra ellos se alzaba esta pequeña isla del perdón, donde los padres se refugiaban ahora, al hablar de la posible boda de su hija como de un feliz acontecimiento. Tampoco la baronesa había olvidado su idea y, como la vida se compone de meros compromisos, dijo: «Además nuestra casita en Westend estará siempre a punto para ellos». Pero la mano de Elizabeth seguía entre las del padre, sentía su presión, Elisabeth no quería saber nada de compromisos. «No, yo me quedo con vosotros», repitió casi con obstinación, y recordó la amarga impresión de su niñez cuando se la excluyó del dormitorio de los padres y no pudo velar ya su respiración; la baronesa hablaba a menudo y con placer de la muerte repentina que a veces se presenta durante el sueño, y si con ello alarmaba a su marido y a Elisabeth, por la mañana constituía una alegre sorpresa comprobar que la noche no los había separado eternamente y se renovaba diariamente el deseo impetuoso de cogerse de las manos, mantenerse unidos, para no ser nunca arrancados unos de otros. Y así estaban ahora sentados en la pérgola, impregnada de perfume de rosas; el perrito de Elisabeth se acercó dando saltos y la saludó como si la hubiera encontrado de nuevo para siempre y puso las patas sobre sus rodillas. Los rosales se destacaban, firmes y rígidos, contra el muro verde del jardín y contra el cielo azul. Elisabeth nunca podría saludar por la mañana con esta alegría a un extraño, por muy pariente que fuera, nunca podría pensar en su cumpleaños con este fervor apasionado y casi devoto que le inspiraba el cumpleaños de su padre, nunca podría rodearlo con aquella angustia incomprensible y sin embargo noble que constituye el amor. Al darse cuenta de ello, sonrió cariñosamente a sus padres y acarició la cabeza del perrito Bello, que la miraba con ojos ansiosos, amantes y devotos.

Más tarde empezó a aburrirse, y aquel ligero sentimiento de rebelión apareció de nuevo. Entonces no era desagradable pensar en Joachim, y vio su esbelta figura en el andén, ligeramente inclinada, en la larga y cuadrada chaqueta del uniforme. Pero su imagen se mezclaba extrañamente con la de tía Brigitte cuando era joven, y Elisabeth ya no sabía si Joachim debía casarse con la dulce tía Brigitte o si ella misma con el joven tío de su niñez. Y aunque sabía que el amor no es como lo presentan las novelas o la ópera, era evidente que ella pensaba en Joachim sin ningún temor; sí, incluso cuando imaginaba una escena en que el tren en marcha lo enganchaba por la espada y Joachim caía bajo las ruedas, esta idea la llenaba de espanto, pero no de esta dulce tristeza y temor, de esta zozobra, con que estaba pendiente de la vida de sus padres. Darse cuenta claramente de ello fue como una renuncia, pero también como un ligero y melancólico alivio. De todos modos resolvió preguntarle a Joachim en la primera ocasión la fecha de su cumpleaños.

Joachim había regresado a Stolpin. Ya en el camino desde la estación, en cuanto atravesaron el pueblo y llegaron a los primeros campos de la hacienda, percibió en su interior una sensación nueva y sorprendente; buscó una expresión y la encontró: mi propiedad. Al descender del coche ante la casa señorial, le invadió un nuevo sentimiento de hogar.

Ahora estaba sentado allí con sus padres, y, si solo se hubiera tratado del desayuno, hubiera sido perfectamente soportable; le gustaba poder sentarse bajo el gran tilo, el jardín fresco y soleado ante él; la buena mantequilla amarilla, la miel, el frutero lleno de fruta, todo aquel bienestar se diferenciaba agradablemente de los precipitados desayunos antes del servicio. Pero las comidas y las cenas y la hora del café eran una tortura; cuanto más avanzaba el día, más obtusa se tornaba la convivencia, y si por la mañana los padres se habían alegrado de la desacostumbrada presencia de su hijo y quizá alimentaban también cada día la esperanza de que saldría de él algo hermoso y que llenara la vida, el transcurso del día —marcado por las horas de las comidas— significaba una decepción por etapas y hacia el atardecer la presencia de Joachim se había convertido en un empeoramiento de su insoportabilidad a dos; incluso la ilusión del correo, único rayo de luz de cada día, había disminuido a causa de la presencia del hijo, y a pesar de que el viejo salía aún todos los días al encuentro del mensajero, era casi un acto de desesperación, era casi una secreta incitación a Joachim para que se fuera de una vez y enviara cartas. Aunque el propio señor Von Pasenow parecía saber que esperaba algo muy distinto a las cartas de Joachim y que el mensajero cuya llegada acechaba no era aquel de la cartera.

Joachim hizo débiles intentos para aproximarse a sus padres. Visitaba al padre en la habitación adornada con trofeos de caza y preguntaba por las cosechas, por la caza, confiando en que al viejo le gustaría que obedeciera con estas insinuaciones su exhortación a «ponerse al corriente». Pero o bien el

padre había olvidado esta exhortación o bien él mismo no sabía demasiado cómo iba la hacienda; pues daba una respuesta desganada, evasiva, e incluso una vez le dijo: «De momento no debes preocuparte de esto», y Joachim, pese a sentirse desligado de una penosa obligación, se acordó de la época en que lo enviaron a la academia de cadetes y le robaron por primera vez su tierra natal. Pero ahora Joachim había vuelto y esperaba a su propio invitado. Era una sensación agradable, que incluía, eso sí, mucha hostilidad contra el padre, pero ni él mismo se dio cuenta e incluso esperaba que también los padres se alegrarían de esa interrupción del creciente aburrimiento y aguardarían con tanta impaciencia como él la llegada de Bertrand. Dejó que el padre huroneara en su correspondencia, y cuando se la alargaba con las palabras: «Por desgracia parece que todavía no hay noticias de tu amigo; ya veremos si vendrá», Joachim, aunque le sonaba como regocijo por el mal ajeno, quería oír solo compasión. Su mal humor no llegaba al colmo hasta ver además en manos del padre una carta de Ruzena. Pero el viejo no decía nada, a lo sumo se encajaba bien el monóculo y le advertía: «Ahora sí que ya va siendo hora de que hagas una visita a los Baddensen»; esto podía ser una alusión mordaz o no, fue suficiente en cualquier caso para hacer tan desagradable a Joachim la obligación de volver a ver a Elisabeth, que pospuso la visita, pese a que su figura y su pañuelo de encaje al viento lo habían acompañado fielmente hasta allí; estaba además cada vez más obsesionado por el deseo y la imagen de llevar a Eduard von Bertrand a su lado en el pescante, cuando se encontrara frente a la escalinata de Lestow.

Pero no sucedió así, al menos de momento, pues un día Elisabeth y su madre se presentaron en una tardía visita de pésame al señor y a la señora Von Pasenow. Elisabeth se sintió decepcionada y sin embargo en cierto modo liberada, porque casualmente Joachim no estaba en casa, y se sintió también un poco ofendida. Se sentaron en el pequeño salón y las señoras se enteraron por el señor Von Pasenow de que Helmuth había caído por el honor del nombre. Elisabeth pensó que tal vez en un tiempo no muy lejano ella llevaría también el nombre por el que alguien había caído y, con un asomo de orgullo y amable sorpresa, constató que entonces también el señor y la señora Von Pasenow serían nuevos parientes. Siguieron hablando del hecho luctuoso y el señor Von Pasenow dijo: «Así van las cosas cuando uno tiene hijos; caen por el honor o por el rey… es ridículo tener hijos varones»; agregó con vehemencia y en tono retador. «Ah, pero las hijas se casan y se nos escapan de las manos», replicó la baronesa esbozando una sonrisa de inteligencia, «y nosotros los viejos nos quedamos solos en cualquier caso.» Pero el señor Von Pasenow no contestó, como habría sido de rigor, que la baronesa no podía contarse todavía entre los viejos, sino que, rígido el gesto y la mirada, quedó unos instantes en silencio y después dijo: «Sí, nos quedamos solos, quedamos solos», y tras reflexionar con evidente esfuerzo, «morimos solos.» «Pero no pensemos en morir, señor Von Pasenow», replicó la baronesa en un tono obligadamente alegre. «No debemos pensar en ello hasta dentro de mucho tiempo; a la lluvia sigue el sol, mi querido señor Von Pasenow, y esto es algo que hay que tener siempre presente.» El señor Von Pasenow volvió a la realidad y volvió a hablar como un caballero: «Suponiendo que los rayos del sol entren en nuestra casa en la figura de usted, baronesa», y sin esperar la halagada réplica de la baronesa, añadió: «Pero es tan poco frecuente… la casa está vacía, ni siquiera el correo trae nada. He escrito a Joachim, pero apenas contesta; está en las maniobras». La señora Von Pasenow se volvió asustada y miró muy inquieta a su marido: «Pero… pero si Joachim está aquí».

Una mirada envenenada la castigó por esta rectificación. «Pero ¿ha escrito acaso? ¿Y dónde está ahora?», y habría surgido de seguro una pequeña discusión, si el canario harziano de la jaula no hubiera lanzado al aire el tenue haz amarillo de su voz. Estaban sentados a su alrededor, como en torno a un surtidor, y olvidaron por unos instantes todo lo demás como si aquel débil y amarillo hilo de voz que ascendía y descendía los envolviera y los uniera en aquella comunidad en que se fundaba la comodidad de su vida y de su muerte; como si aquella línea, que se elevaba y los colmaba, y regresaba sin embargo a su punto de origen y se redondeaba, los dispensara de hablar, tal vez porque era un delgado adorno amarillo de la habitación, tal vez porque durante unos instantes les daba plena conciencia de que se pertenecían y los arrancaba al espantoso silencio, cuyo mutismo y cuyo estruendo se alzan entre hombre y hombre como un sonido impenetrable, una pared que la voz humana no puede franquear en ninguna dirección, de modo que el hombre debe estremecerse. Pero ahora que el canario cantaba, ni siquiera el señor Von Pasenow oía el espantoso mutismo y todos se alegraron cuando la señora Von Pasenow dijo: «Bueno, vamos a tomar el café». Y cuando atravesaron el salón grande, cuyas cortinas estaban echadas para evitar el sol de la tarde, nadie pensó que allí había estado el túmulo de Helmuth.

Después llegó Joachim y Elisabeth sufrió una nueva decepción, pues había conservado en la memoria su imagen de uniforme y ahora vestía atuendo de cazador. Se sintieron extraños y cohibidos, y ni siquiera cuando volvieron con los demás al salón y Elisabeth se detuvo ante la jaula del canario, al que tendió un dedo entre los barrotes para que la picara furioso, ni siquiera cuando ella decidió que tendría en su propio salón —si se casaba— un pequeño pájaro amarillo como aquel, ni siquiera entonces pudo relacionar a Joachim con su boda. Pero esto, en realidad, era agradable y tranquilizador, y le facilitó que se pusieran de acuerdo, al despedirse, en que Joachim la pasaría a buscar para un paseo a caballo. Antes, naturalmente, les haría él una visita.

A Bertrand le fue posible por fin aceptar la invitación de Pasenow y llegó a Berlín en un tren nocturno con la idea de quedarse un par de días. Se entiende que quería ocuparse de Ruzena: fue directamente al teatro y le envió una nota al camerino con unas flores. Ruzena se alegró de recibir su tarjeta, se alegró con las flores y la halagó que Bertrand la esperase a la salida del escenario. «Bien, pequeña Ruzena, ¿qué tal va todo?» Y Ruzena le contó enseguida a borbotones que iba bien, muy bien, ¡oh!, en realidad nada bien, porque añoraba mucho a Joachim, pero ahora naturalmente le iba bien, porque se alegraba horrores de que Bertrand, tan buen amigo de Joachim, viniera a buscarla. Luego, sentados frente a frente durante la comida y después de haber hablado mucho de Joachim, Ruzena, cosa que le sucedía con frecuencia, se puso triste de repente:

—Ahora usted va a ver a Joachim y yo quedo aquí; hay injusticia en el mundo.

—Claro que hay injusticia en el mundo, y más de la que tú supones, pequeña Ruzena —a ambos les parecía natural que él la tutease—, y en parte ha sido la preocupación por ti lo que me ha traído a Berlín.

—¿Qué quiere decir?

—Pues no me acaba de gustar que estés metida en esto del teatro.

—¿Por qué? Si es muy bonito…

—Me precipité un poco en complaceros… y todo porque sois unos románticos y sabe Dios qué os imaginabais del teatro.

—No entiendo qué quiere decir.

—No importa, pequeña Ruzena, pero es imposible que sigas en esto. En definitiva, ¿adonde te lleva? ¿Qué será finalmente de ti, pequeña? Hay que cuidar de ti, y con romanticismo no puede uno cuidar de nadie.

Ruzena le contestó, muy tiesa y orgullosa, que ella podía cuidar de sí misma; no necesitaba a nadie y Joachim solo tenía que irse, si quería dejarla, que se fuera, «y usted es hombre malo, solo venido para hacer daño a un amigo»; lloraba y miraba rencorosamente a Bertrand entre lágrimas. No fue fácil tranquilizarla, porque insistía en que él era un mal hombre y un mal amigo, que quería echarle a perder una noche tan hermosa. Y de repente se puso muy pálida y le miró con ojos asustados:

—¿Le ha enviado él para decir todo ha terminado?

—Pero ¡Ruzena!

—No, ya puede decir diez veces no, yo sé que es así, oh, los dos son malos, me han metido en vergüenza.

Bertrand comprendió que con buenas razones nada se arreglaría; y tal vez en la torpe sospecha de Ruzena se ocultaba un presentimiento de la verdadera situación y de lo vano de sus esperanzas. Parecía un animalito acorralado. Y quizá era conveniente que ella considerara seriamente el porvenir. Por eso él se limitó a mover la cabeza en gesto negativo: «Dígame, pequeña, ¿no podría usted regresar a su casa, mientras Joachim esté fuera?». Ella solo entendió que se la enviaba lejos.

—Pero Ruzena, ¿quién pretende alejarte? Sería mejor que estuvieras entre los tuyos, en lugar de quedarte aquí sola en Berlín en este absurdo teatro…

Ella no le dejó terminar:

—No tengo a nadie, todos son malos conmigo… no tengo a nadie y usted quiere alejarme.

—Ruzena, sé razonable; cuando Pasenow vuelva a Berlín, tú regresas también.

Ruzena ya no le oía, quería marcharse, no quería saber nada más. Pero a Bertrand no le gustaba dejarla partir así y pensó cómo podría llevarla a fijar su atención en otras cosas; por fin se le ocurrió que podían escribir una carta en común a Joachim. Ruzena estuvo de acuerdo inmediatamente; él se hizo traer papel y escribió: «Recordándolo cordialmente, en una alegre velada, le envía afectuosos saludos Bertrand», y ella añadió «y muchos besuquitos de Ruzena». Estampó un beso en el papel, pero no lograba contener las lágrimas. «Ha terminado», repetía, y pidió que la acompañase a casa. Bertrand accedió. Pero a fin de no dejarla demasiado pronto con aquella desesperación, propuso ir a pie. Para tranquilizarla —las palabras no surtían efecto—, había cogido su mano como un buen médico; ella cedió, un poco agradecida y buscando apoyo, y le dejó la mano con un leve apretón. Es un animalito, pensó Bertrand, y para esclarecer la situación dijo: «Ruzena, yo soy sin embargo un hombre malo y tu enemigo», pero ella no respondió. Bertrand sintió una leve y delicada irritación por el confusionismo que reinaba en la mente de Ruzena, irritación que extendió también a Joachim, al que hacía responsable de Ruzena y de su destino, y que no parecía menos confuso que la muchacha. Posiblemente debido al calor del cuerpo de Ruzena, tuvo por un momento la perversa idea de que Joachim se merecía que lo engañaran con ella, pero no lo pensó seriamente y pronto volvió a sentir la amable benevolencia que siempre había experimentado hacia Joachim. Joachim y Ruzena le parecían dos seres que solo participaban con una pequeña parte de sí mismos en la época que les había tocado vivir, en la edad que tenían, mientras que la parte mayor estaba en otro

sitio, tal vez en otro planeta o en otra época o simplemente en la infancia. A Bertrand le sorprendía que tantos hombres de distintas épocas vivieran juntos al mismo tiempo e incluso tuvieran la misma edad: de ahí la inconsistencia general y la dificultad de comprenderse racionalmente unos a otros; solo era sorprendente que, no obstante, existiera algo así como una comunidad humana y una comprensión ultratemporal. Probablemente también lo único que podía hacerse con Joachim era acariciarle las manos. ¿Qué debía y podía decirle? ¿Qué finalidad tenía en realidad esta visita a Stolpin? Bertrand se sentía molesto, pero luego pensó que hablaría con Joachim acerca del destino de Ruzena; esto prestaba al viaje y a la pérdida de tiempo un sentido y, nuevamente de buen humor, apretó la mano de Ruzena.

Se despidieron delante de la casa, estuvieron mudos unos instantes uno frente al otro, y parecía como si Ruzena esperase todavía algo. Bertrand sonrió y, antes de que ella pudiera ofrecerle los labios, la besó en la mejilla como lo habría hecho su tío. Ella le acarició la mano con un movimiento rápido y quiso refugiarse en la casa, pero él la detuvo en la puerta:

—Mañana a primera hora me voy, pequeña Ruzena, ¿qué debo decirle a Joachim?

—Nada de nada —dijo ella rápida y enfadada; pero luego reflexionó—. Es usted malo, pero vendré a estación.

—Buenas noche, Ruzena.

Bertrand sintió de nuevo aquella ligera irritación, pero como todavía conservaba en los labios la huella de su mejilla, parecida a un suave plumón, anduvo arriba y abajo de la oscura calle y miraba hacia la casa de Ruzena, en espera de que se encendiera una luz en alguna ventana. Pero o la luz ya estaba encendida antes o la habitación daba a un patio interior —¡Joachim hubiera podido preocuparse de alojarla mejor!—, lo cierto es que Bertrand esperó en vano y, tras contemplar un buen rato la casa, decidió que ya se había hecho bastante en aras del romanticismo, encendió un cigarro y se fue a su casa.

Mientras las habitaciones comunes tenían parquet, los dormitorios de los invitados en el segundo piso tenían solo suelos encerados, grandes tablas de madera blanca y blanda, separadas por listones un poco más oscuros. Los troncos de los que se habían cortado estas tablas tenían que haber sido enormes, y aunque solo era madera blanda, su regularidad y su tamaño testimoniaban la opulencia del antiguo propietario. Las junturas entre los listones y las tablas estaban apretadas y aquellas que se habían ensanchado más tarde al secarse la madera habían sido rellenadas tan cuidadosamente con madera aglomerada que apenas se notaban. Los muebles habían sido construidos por el carpintero del pueblo y debían de proceder de la época en que las tropas napoleónicas pasaron por el lugar, al menos cabía suponerlo así, porque recordaban lejanamente aquel estilo llamado Imperio, pero podían ser algo anteriores o posteriores, porque con sus formas ventrudas se apartaban del estilo rectilíneo propio de aquella época. Había un armario de espejo cuyos cristales estaban separados extrañamente por un recto listón de madera, había cómodas que, por demasiados o por pocos cajones, chocaban contra una arquitectura pura. Pero aunque estos muebles estuvieran alineados contra las paredes casi sin orden ni concierto, aunque la cama se hubiera colocado de manera sumamente inadecuada entre dos puertas, y la gran estufa de azulejos blancos estuviera encajonada entre dos armarios en un rincón, sin embargo, la espaciosa habitación, cuando el sol lucía por entre las cortinas blancas y las ventanas se reflejaban con sus cruces en el brillante lustre de los muebles, producía una agradable sensación de bienestar y sosiego. Y así podía ocurrir todavía hoy que el gran crucifijo, que adornaba la habitación sobre la cama, no fuera simplemente un adorno o un objeto más de la habitación, sino que recobrara el sentido con que primitivamente se había colocado allí: guardián y recuerdo para el invitado, que le advirtiera que se hallaba en una casa de la comunidad cristiana, en una casa donde se preocupaban de todos los detalles de su bienestar físico, y de la que podía partir para la caza en alegre compañía, y regresar para hacer honor a la comida y a los densos vinos, en una casa donde los cazadores se permitían también algunos chistes subidos de tono y donde, en aquellos tiempos en que se hicieron los muebles, uno guiñaba todavía el ojo si una criada le gustaba, pero también una casa donde el huésped, por fatigado que estuviera a causa del vino, tenía que pensar por la noche en su alma y arrepentirse de sus pecados. Y correspondía a este modo de pensar, severo en el fondo, aquel austero y sobrio grabado en acero que colgaba sobre el sofá tapizado de reps verde, que despertaba en muchos visitantes el recuerdo de la reina Luisa, ya que representaba una mujer alta en traje antiguo —*La mère des Gracches* era el título del cuadro— y no solo el traje recordaba el de la reina, sino que el altar ante el que se inclinaba recordaba también el altar de la patria. Ciertamente la mayoría de los cazadores que habían pasado la noche en aquella habitación llevaban una vida mundana, tomando el privilegio y el placer donde se les brindaba, sin avergonzarse de vender la cosecha o los cerdos con pingües beneficios a los comerciantes, se habían entregado a una bárbara cacería, en que las criaturas de Dios caían a miles bajo los disparos, y muchos de ellos estaban también ávidos de carne de mujeres: pero por más que considerasen su vida pecaminosa y señorial como un buen derecho y como un privilegio concedido por Dios, estaban dispuestos a sacrificarla en cualquier momento por el honor de la patria o por la gloria de Dios, y aunque no se les presentara

ocasión de hacerlo, su disposición a considerar la vida como algo secundario e insignificante era tan fuerte que su condición de pecadores casi no pesaba en el platillo de la balanza. Y se sentían libres de toda culpa, cuando caminaban en la niebla matinal sobre las ramas levemente crujientes o cuando al anochecer trepaban al mirador por una escalera estrecha y empinada y, por encima de arbustos y calveros, donde aún bailaban enjambres de mosquitos, oteaban el bosque hasta sus linderos: cuando entonces el húmedo olor de la hierba y de la madera subía hasta ellos y una hormiga corría por la seca barandilla del mirador para perderse en la corteza, podía suceder que en sus almas, pese a ser tipos rudos con los pies bien asentados en el suelo, se despertara algo que sonaba como música y que la vida que habían vivido y les quedaba por vivir se concentrara de tal modo en un solo instante, que sintieran la mano de su madre sobre el cabello infantil como para toda la eternidad, aunque ante ellos se irguiera, sin ningún lapso de tiempo, sin ningún espacio ya que los separara, aquella a la que no temían: la muerte. Entonces toda la madera en torno podía convertirse en la madera del crucifijo, porque en ningún otro lugar conviven tan íntimamente lo mágico y lo terrenal como en el corazón del cazador, y cuando el macho cabrío aparece en el claro del bosque, la inspiración está presente todavía y la vida sigue pareciendo atemporal, momentánea y eterna, comprimida dentro de la propia mano, de modo que el disparo que mata la vida ajena es como un símbolo y una necesidad de salvar la propia en la gracia. El cazador siempre sale al bosque para ver la cruz en la cornamenta del ciervo, y por esta revelación el precio de matar no le parece demasiado caro. Y también es muy posible que vuelva a su cuarto tras la copiosa comida de un día de caza para levantar de nuevo los ojos al crucifijo y para recordar, aunque desde considerable distancia, esa eternidad en que su vida está anclada. Y frente a tal eternidad puede que tampoco la limpieza del cuerpo pese más en la balanza que la pecaminosidad de su vida terrenal: en el lavatorio hay una palangana cuya pequeñez contrasta extrañamente con las proporciones del cazador y con las demás dimensiones de la vida, y la jarra contiene probablemente menos agua que el vino que puede beber el cazador. También la estrecha mesilla junto a la cama, que ofrece lugar en un oculto cajón al vaso de noche, le atribuye medidas insignificantes. El cazador lo utiliza y se desploma ruidosamente en la cama.

En esta habitación, cuidadosamente preparada desde siglos atrás para las necesidades del cazador, fue alojado Bertrand a su llegada a Stolpin.

Entre los recuerdos curiosos que Bertrand se trajo de su estancia en Stolpin figuraba, y no en último lugar, la imagen del viejo señor Von Pasenow. Ya el primer día e inmediatamente después del desayuno, el viejo señor le invitó a acompañarle en su paseo y visitar la finca. Era una mañana gris y tempestuosa, no corría ni un soplo de aire, pero interrumpían el silencio los golpes acompasados de los mayales que retumbaban en las dos eras. Este ritmo pareció alegrar al señor Von Pasenow: se detuvo varias veces y siguió el compás con su bastón. Luego preguntó: «¿Quiere ver el establo de las vacas?» y se dirigió hacia el edificio bajo y alargado; se detuvo no obstante en medio del patio y sacudió la cabeza: «No es posible, el rebaño está en los pastos». Bertrand le preguntó amablemente qué razas criaba; el señor Von Pasenow lo miró primero como si no comprendiera la pregunta, después dijo, encogiéndose de hombros: «Tanto da», y llevó a su huésped fuera del patio; alrededor de la ligera hondonada donde se asentaba la finca se extendían las colinas, campo tras campo, y en todas partes estaban cosechando. «Todo pertenece a la hacienda», dijo el señor Von Pasenow, orgullosamente, trazando un círculo con un bastón; después mantuvo el brazo levantado con el bastón en una dirección determinada; Bertrand miró hacia allá y vio sobresalir la torre de la iglesia detrás de las colinas: «Allí está correos», fue la explicación, y el señor Von Pasenow tomó el camino del pueblo. La atmósfera estaba cargada; el golpear de los mayales iba enmudeciendo tras ellos y solo persistían en el aire inmóvil las voces de los segadores, el martillar de las guadañas y el zumbido de las gavillas al caer. El señor Von Pasenow se detuvo: «¿Tiene usted también a veces miedo?».

Bertrand quedó sorprendido, pero se sintió conmovido y lleno de simpatía ante esta pregunta tan humana: «¿Yo? ¡Oh, sí, a menudo!». El señor Von Pasenow se acercó interesado: «¿Cuándo tiene usted miedo? ¿Cuando hay silencio?». Bertrand se dio cuenta de que algo no concordaba: «Pero el silencio es a veces maravilloso; precisamente ahora yo me siento dichoso en este silencio del campo». El señor Von Pasenow no estaba de acuerdo y se enojó: «Usted no comprende nada…». Y tras una pausa: «¿Ha tenido usted hijos?». «Que yo sepa no, señor Von Pasenow.» «Ya, ya, por eso», el señor Von Pasenow consultó el reloj y miró a lo largo del camino; sacudió la cabeza; «incomprensible», después de nuevo a Bertrand: «¿Cuándo tiene usted miedo en realidad?», pero no esperó la respuesta, sino que miró de nuevo el reloj: «Ya tendría que estar aquí…». Después miró abiertamente a Bertrand: «¿Me escribirá usted alguna vez, cuando esté de viaje?». Bertrand asintió; lo haría con sumo gusto, y el señor Von Pasenow pareció muy satisfecho. «Sí, escríbame, me interesa, me interesan muchas cosas… escríbame también cuando tenga miedo… pero todavía no llega, usted ve, nadie me escribe, ni siquiera los hijos…» Entonces se hizo visible a lo lejos un hombre con una cartera negra: «¡Ahí está!». El señor Von Pasenow puso bastón y piernas en un movimiento rectilíneo y apresurado y, cuando el hombre estuvo al alcance de su voz, le gritó: «¿Dónde te has metido otra vez tanto tiempo? Hoy has ido a correos por última vez… Estás despedido, ¿te enteras?, ¡despedido!».

Su rostro se había puesto rojo y agitaba el bastón ante las narices del hombre, mientras este, evidentemente acostumbrado ya a tales encuentros, se quitaba tranquilamente la cartera del hombro y la tendía a su señor, que inmediatamente se sacó la llave de la chaqueta y la abrió con mano temblorosa. Temblando metió la mano en la cartera, pero, al sacar únicamente un par de periódicos, pareció que iba a repetirse el ataque de ira, ya que puso el producto de su búsqueda bajo la nariz del mensajero sin pronunciar palabra. Pero por lo visto recordó que tenía un invitado a su lado, porque tendió los periódicos a Bertrand: «Mire, véalo por sí mismo», se lamentó y los volvió a meter en la cartera, la cerró, y aclaró al reanudar la marcha: «Este año me tendré que mudar a la ciudad; aquí hay demasiado silencio para mí».

Cuando cayeron las primeras gotas de la tormenta, habían llegado justamente al pueblo, y el señor Von Pasenow propuso esperar en casa del pastor a que amainara la lluvia. «Además usted tiene que conocerlo», añadió.

Se puso furioso al no hallar en casa al pastor y, cuando la esposa del clérigo les dijo que su marido estaba en la escuela, montó en cólera: «También usted parece creer que a un viejo se le puede contar lo que a uno le plazca, pero todavía no soy tan viejo como para no saber que estamos en vacaciones». Sin embargo nadie había dicho que el pastor estuviera en la escuela dando clase, y además volvería enseguida. «Excusas», refunfuñó el señor Von Pasenow, pero la esposa del pastor no se dejó amilanar, sino que rogó a los señores que tomaran asiento mientras ella iba a por un vaso de vino. En cuanto abandonó la habitación, el señor Von Pasenow se inclinó hacia Bertrand: «Me evita siempre que puede porque sabe que lo he calado». «¿Calado en qué, señor Von Pasenow?» «Pues que es un pastor muy ignorante e inepto, naturalmente. Pero por desgracia estoy obligado a mantener buenas relaciones con él. Aquí en el campo necesitamos todos unos de otros y…» vaciló y añadió en voz baja: «también el sepulcro está bajo su tutela.» Llegó el pastor y Bertrand fue presentado como amigo de Joachim. «Sí, unos vienen y otros se van», opinó el señor Von Pasenow pensativo, y los presentes no supieron si esta alusión al pobre Helmuth significaba un cumplido o una grosería para Bertrand. «Sí, y este es nuestro teólogo», prosiguió las presentaciones, mientras el teólogo sonreía débilmente. La esposa del pastor había servido vino y un poco de jamón, y el señor Von Pasenow había bebido rápidamente un vaso. Mientras los otros estaban sentados a la mesa, él permaneció junto a la ventana, tamborileó en el cristal el ritmo de los mayales y vio pasar las nubes como si no viera llegar el momento de marcharse. En la conversación perezosa y fluida, gritó él desde la ventana: «Dígame usted, señor Von Bertrand, ¿ha visto usted alguna vez a un teólogo culto que no sepa nada del más allá?». «El señor Von Pasenow otra vez con sus bromas», dijo el pastor intimidado. «Por favor, dígalo usted mismo, ¿en qué se diferencia el ministro de Dios de los demás hombres, si no tiene comunicación con el más allá?» El señor Von Pasenow se había dado la vuelta y miraba fija y malignamente al pastor a través de su monóculo, «y si ha aprendido a tener alguna, cosa que me permito poner en duda, ¿qué derecho tiene a ocultárnoslo…? ¡ocultármelo a mí, a mí!». El tono de su voz se dulcificó un poco «A mí, que soy, como él mismo reconoce, un padre sometido a penosas pruebas». El pastor dijo en voz baja: «Dios es el único que puede enviarle un mensaje, señor Von Pasenow, créalo de una vez, por favor». El señor Von Pasenow se encogió de hombros: «Lo creo…, sí, lo creo, entérese bien…». Después de una pausa, vuelto hacia la ventana, encogiéndose nuevamente de hombros: «Bueno, tanto da», y siguió mirando a la calle y tamborileando sobre el cristal. La lluvia había amainado y el señor Von Pasenow ordenó: «Ahora podemos irnos». Al despedirse estrechó la mano del pastor: «Y déjese usted ver alguna vez por casa… a cenar, ¿de acuerdo? Nuestro joven amigo estará también con nosotros». Entonces se fueron. En la calle del pueblo había charcos, pero el campo casi estaba seco otra vez; la lluvia había bastado apenas para borrar las hendiduras del suelo. El cielo estaba todavía cubierto por un ligero vaho blanquecino, se sentía el sol punzante que irrumpiría pronto a través de él. El señor Von Pasenow guardaba silencio, no intervenía en lo que Bertrand le decía. Solo una vez se detuvo y dijo doctoralmente con el bastón en alto: «Hay que ser muy precavido con estos sabios de Dios. Téngalo usted presente».

En lo sucesivo se repitieron los paseos matinales y a veces se les unía Joachim. Entonces el viejo fruncía el ceño y callaba e incluso dejaba de interesarse por el miedo de Bertrand. Si habitualmente planteaba la cuestión de modo subrepticio y tanteante, ahora enmudecía. Pero también Joachim estaba taciturno. Porque tampoco él podía preguntar lo que quería saber de Bertrand y Bertrand le siguió debiendo obstinadamente una explicación. Así vagaban los tres por el campo, y tanto el padre como el hijo reprochaban a Bertrand que decepcionara su espera ansiosa de saber. Pero Bertrand ponía todos sus esfuerzos en mantener vivá la conversación.

Si Joachim había aplazado primeramente su visita a Lestow, porque le obsesionaba la idea de ir allí acompañado de Bertrand, ahora el ligero despecho que sentía contra Bertrand fue tal vez el motivo de que la aplazara nuevamente: alimentaba la tenue esperanza de que, si Bertrand hablaba, todo se desarrollaría tan llana y sencillamente que, sin más, podría llevarlo con él a Lestow. Pero como Bertrand, a pesar de este incentivo, del que por otra parte no tenía ni idea, persistía en su silencio decepcionante, Joachim tuvo que decidirse al fin y partió solo. Una tarde tomó el coche para ir a Lestow, el coche de altas ruedas, con las

piernas envueltas lisa y correctamente en la manta, el látigo oblicuo ante sí y las riendas tersas entre los guantes marrones. En el momento de salir, su padre había dicho «¡Vaya, por fin!», y Joachim se sintió lleno de oposición contra el quimérico proyecto matrimonial. A lo lejos surgió la cúspide del campanario del pueblo vecino; una iglesia católica le recuerda la fe católico-romana de Ruzena; Bertrand había hablado de Ruzena. ¿No sería mejor interrumpir simplemente esta absurda estancia en Stolpin, volver simplemente a su lado? En este punto de sus reflexiones todo empezó a molestarle: era repugnante el polvo del camino, repugnantes las polvorientas y cansadas hojas de los árboles, que anunciaban el otoño. Desde la llegada de Bertrand sentía otra vez nostalgia del uniforme: dos hombres en el mismo uniforme eran algo impersonal, eran soldados del rey; dos hombres en parecidos trajes de civil eran algo impúdico, eran como dos hermanos; e impúdica le parecía la corta chaqueta de civil, que dejaba al descubierto las piernas y la abertura del pantalón. Había que compadecer a Elisabeth, que tenía que ver a los hombres con chaquetas cortas y pantalones al descubierto —era muy curioso que nunca se le hubiera ocurrido pensar esto respecto a Ruzena—, pero al menos para esta visita hubiera debido ponerse el uniforme. La ancha corbata blanca con el alfiler en forma de herradura cubría toda la abertura del chaleco; menos mal. Se llevó la mano a la corbata y comprobó que estaba bien puesta. No en balde se coloca a los muertos en el ataúd un lienzo sobre la parte inferior del cuerpo. Aquí, por este mismo camino a Lestow, había pasado Helmuth, había visitado a Elisabeth y a su madre, y sobre su tumba se había echado polvo como este. ¿Le había dejado su hermano, en realidad, a Elisabeth como herencia? ¿O a Ruzena? ¿O incluso a Bertrand? Hubieran debido darle a Bertrand la habitación de Helmuth, en lugar de alojarlo en el solitario cuarto de huéspedes; pero no hubiera sido correcto. Todo esto era como un engranaje inevitable, que sin embargo dependía en cierto modo de su propia voluntad y precisamente por eso le parecía inevitable y lógico, más inevitable sin duda que el engranaje del servicio. Pero no pudo seguir el hilo de sus reflexiones, que le habrían revelado quizá algo espantoso, porque acababa de entrar en el pueblo y tuvo que poner atención en los niños que jugaban; justamente pasado el pueblo cruzó entre las dos casitas de los jardineros a izquierda y derecha del portón del parque.

«Me alegro de verle por fin otra vez aquí, señor Von Pasenow», dijo el barón, que lo recibió en el vestíbulo, y cuando Joachim le habló del invitado, a causa del cual había postergado su visita, el barón le reprochó no haber traído consigo a Bertrand. Ni el propio Joachim se lo explicaba; de seguro no hubiera supuesto ningún problema; pero cuando entró Elisabeth, encontró sin embargo más correcto haber venido solo. La encontró muy hermosa, oh, seguro que Bertrand tampoco se habría sustraído al encanto de una belleza así, y que en su presencia no se habría atrevido a emplear aquel tono desenfadado que le era propio. No obstante, a Joachim le hubiera gustado presenciarlo, al igual que se desea por ejemplo oír en la iglesia una palabra irrespetuosa o asistir a una ejecución.

Tomaron el té en la terraza y Joachim, sentado junto a Elisabeth, tenía la impresión de haber vivido aquella situación no hacía mucho tiempo. Pero ¿cuándo? Desde su última visita a Lestow habían transcurrido casi tres años y entonces estaba muy avanzado el otoño y habría sido imposible sentarse en la terraza. Pero mientras pensaba todavía en esto y era como si en aquel entonces hubieran encendido las luces del palacio, una extraña asociación de ideas llevó su pensamiento hasta el absurdo y casi a la confusión total, pues resultaba que su cómplice Bertrand —le repugnó un poco que se le hubiera ocurrido la palabra «cómplice»—, cómplice y testigo de su intimidad con Ruzena, habría tenido que estar aquí con él ante Elisabeth. ¿Cómo había podido siquiera presentarlo a sus padres? Sintió de nuevo la fatal sensación de haber caído en lo resbaladizo a causa de Bertrand y de repente le resultó penoso tenerse que levantar después del té en su traje de civil; le hubiera gustado permanecer con la servilleta sobre las rodillas, pero se dirigían ya hacia el parque. Cuando se distinguieron los edificios de la administración, el barón opinó que Pasenow volvería también pronto a la agricultura; al menos así lo había insinuado el viejo señor. Joachim, con renovado rencor contra el intento paterno de determinar su vida, hubiera respondido con gusto que no pensaba regresar al hogar paterno; naturalmente no podía manifestar una cosa así; no hubiera correspondido del todo a los hechos, ni tampoco a su reencontrado apego a su tierra natal y sus propiedades, y por eso se limitó a responder que no era fácil dejar el servicio, y menos ahora que estaba a punto de ser ascendido a capitán de caballería. Y uno no abandona tan fácilmente y sin más ni más una carrera a la que ha tomado cariño, aunque esto sea solo una convención sentimental; él lo veía claramente en su amigo, el señor Von Bertrand, quien, pese a sus notables éxitos, echaba probablemente de menos en su interior el regimiento. Y casi sin darse cuenta empezó a hablar de los negocios de Bertrand esparcidos por todo el mundo, de sus grandes viajes, y lo rodeó, casi infantilmente, con tal aureola de explorador que las damas no pudieron ocultar su alegría por conocer pronto a un hombre tan interesante. No obstante, Pasenow tenía la impresión de que todos sentían miedo, no precisamente de Bertrand, sino de la vida que llevaba, pues Elisabeth quedó cohibida y opinó que era difícilmente imaginable saber a un hermano o a cualquier otro pariente cercano tan lejos por el mundo que no se pudiera decir nunca con certeza dónde se hallaba. Y el barón le dio la razón y añadió que solo un hombre sin familia podía llevar aquella vida. Una vida de marino, concluyó. Pero Joachim, que no quería quedarse atrás respecto a su amigo y se sentía aquí

un poco como su representante, contó además que Bertrand lo inducía a inscribirse en el servicio colonial, y la baronesa replicó severamente: «Usted no puede hacerles esto a sus pobres padres». «No», dijo el barón, «usted se debe al legado de sus antepasados», y Joachim oyó estas palabras sin desagrado. Después, acompañados por el perro de Elisabeth, regresaron a la explanada frente a la casa. El césped olía a humedad y a rocío, y en la casa se veían ya algunas luces, pues las tardes empezaban a ser más cortas.

Cuando Joachim emprendió el camino de regreso, era casi noche cerrada. Lo último que había visto de Elisabeth era su sombra en la terraza; la muchacha se había quitado el sombrero de jardín y a la media luz del día moribundo se destacaba sobre el cielo claro, atravesado por franjas rojizas. Se veía perfectamente el pesado moño en su nuca y Joachim se preguntó por qué encontraba a esta niña tan hermosa, tan hermosa que la dulzura de Ruzena estaba por desaparecer de su memoria. Y sin embargo se sentía atraído por Ruzena y no por la pureza de Elisabeth. ¿Por qué era hermosa Elisabeth? Los árboles del camino se erguían oscuros y el polvo olía a frescor, quizá como en una cueva o en un sótano. Pero al oeste persistía aún una franja rojiza en aquel cielo que se iba oscureciendo sobre el paisaje ondulado.

La tarde en que Joachim fue de visita a Lestow, inmediatamente después de su partida, el señor Von Pasenow subió por la escalera hasta el segundo piso y llamó a la puerta de Bertrand: «Tenía que hacerle alguna vez una visita…», y con astuta complicidad, «lo he alejado de aquí…, ¡no ha sido fácil!». Bertrand pronunció unas palabras amables; él hubiera bajado con mucho gusto. «No», dijo el señor Von Pasenow, «hay que guardar las formas. Pero después del té saldremos un rato. Tengo algo que decirle». Se sentó unos instantes, para confirmar lo formulario de su visita, pero con su inquietud característica dejó pronto la habitación, para volver antes de haber cerrado la puerta tras de sí: «Solo quiero comprobar si tiene usted cuanto necesita. En esta casa no puede uno fiarse de nadie». Dio una vuelta por el cuarto, contempló *La mère des Graeches*, inspeccionó también el suelo y dijo en tono amable: «Hasta el té, pues».

Habían encendido los cigarros y caminaban por el parque, cruzaron el huerto, en cuyos árboles maduraban ya los frutos, y llegaron a los campos. El señor Von Pasenow irradiaba buen humor. Un grupo de cosechadoras venía hacia ellos. Para dejar paso al amo se alinearon en fila india al borde del campo y una tras otra saludaron al pasar. El señor Von Pasenow las miraba a todas por debajo del pañuelo que llevaban en la cabeza y, en cuanto hubo pasado la fila india, dijo «guapas mozas». «¿*Polacas*?», preguntó Bertrand. «Naturalmente; es decir, casi todas… sí, gentuza de poco fiar.» Todo aquello era hermoso, opinó Bertrand, y en realidad envidiaba a los señores rurales. El señor Von Pasenow le dio un golpecito en el brazo: «También usted podría serlo». Bertrand sacudió la cabeza; no era tan fácil y además uno tenía que haber sido educado para ello. «Yo me ocuparía de esto», fue la respuesta, acompañada de una risa de confianza. Después se calló y Bertrand esperó. Pero el señor Von Pasenow pareció haber olvidado lo que en realidad quería decirle, pues, como fruto de sus cavilaciones, dijo al cabo de un rato: «Naturalmente usted debería escribirme… con frecuencia, sí». Después: «Cuando usted viva aquí algún día, ya no tendremos más miedo; ni usted ni yo tendremos más miedo… ¿verdad?». Había apoyado la mano en el brazo de Bertrand y lo miraba angustiado. «Claro, señor Von Pasenow, ¿por qué íbamos a tener miedo?» El señor Von Pasenow se sorprendió: «Pero usted dijo…», y quedó con la mirada fija. «Bueno, tanto da…» Se detuvo, dio la vuelta y parecía tener intención de volver a casa. Después se arrepintió y condujo a Bertrand camino adelante. Al cabo de un rato preguntó: «¿Lo ha visitado ya?». «¿Visitado?» «Bueno, en el mausoleo.» Bertrand se sintió un poco avergonzado; pero con el ambiente que reinaba en la casa no había tenido ocasión de manifestar deseos de visitar la tumba. Cuando se disponía a contestar negativamente, el señor Von Pasenow rió satisfecho: «Entonces tenemos algo pendiente», y, como una agradable sorpresa para el invitado, señaló con el bastón el muro del cementerio que tenían ante sí. «Entre usted, yo le esperaré aquí», ordenó, y, como Bertrand dudara un instante, se puso involuntariamente a la defensiva: «No, yo no entro con usted», y llevó a Bertrand hasta la puerta, sobre la que brillaba la inscripción en letras doradas: Descanse en paz. Bertrand entró y, tras permanecer un rato conveniente junto al panteón, volvió sobre sus pasos. El señor Von Pasenow patrullaba a lo largo del muro, visiblemente impaciente: «¿Estuvo usted con él…? ¿Y…?». Bertrand le oprimió la mano, pero el señor Von Pasenow aparentemente no quería condolencias, sino que quería oír algo; hizo un gesto como para ayudarlo a hablar y al no conseguirlo suspiró: «Cayó por el honor de su nombre… sí, y Joachim entretanto va de visita…». Señaló de nuevo con el bastón, esta vez en dirección a Lestow. Al cabo de un momento completó la idea con una risita socarrona: «Lo he enviado a ver a una novia», y como si estas palabras le recordaran que quería hablar de algo con Bertrand: «Me han dicho que es usted experto en los negocios».

En efecto, así era, pero solo dentro de su ramo, respondió Bertrand. «Bueno, para nuestro asunto será suficiente. Sabe usted, querido amigo, ahora yo necesito naturalmente consejo, ya que él ha caído», hizo una pausa y dijo luego con gravedad: «Cuestiones de herencia». Bertrand opinó que el señor Von Pasenow tendría seguramente un notario de confianza que le ayudara en aquellos asuntos, pero el señor Von Pasenow no le escuchó: «Joachim asegurará su posición mediante el matrimonio; se le podría desheredar», y rió otra vez. Bertrand intentó desviar la conversación y señaló una liebre: «Pronto llegarán los buenos

tiempos para los cazadores, señor Von Pasenow». «Sí, sí, que venga a cazar, en esto siempre podemos necesitarlo… ¿Le invitaremos, no? Naturalmente tiene que escribirnos, ya se lo haremos comprender, ¿verdad?» Como el señor Von Pasenow reía, Bertrand sonrió también, aunque se sentía muy incómodo. Estaba un poco enfadado, porque Joachim le había endosado a este hombre; ¡y cuán torpemente parecía comportarse también en esta ocasión Joachim, al dejar al viejo chocho en este estado de ánimo! ¿Lo habría llamado el desdichado para que él pusiera también aquí orden en sus asuntos? Dijo pues: «Sí, sí, señor Von Pasenow, ya nos lo educaremos», y con esto había hallado el tono que el viejo quería oír. Se colgó del brazo de Bertrand, trató cuidadosamente de mantener el paso acoplado al suyo y no le soltó ni después de haber llegado a la casa. Pese a la oscuridad reinante, pasearon arriba y abajo por el patio, hasta que llegó Joachim. Cuando Joachim saltó del coche, el señor Von Pasenow dijo: «Te presento a mi amigo, el señor Von Bertrand», y con un gesto casi displicente, «y este es mi hijo… viene de ver a la novia». El olor del establo llegaba hasta ellos y el señor Von Pasenow se sintió bien.

En realidad no es hermosa, se decía Bertrand, mientras observaba a Elisabeth sentada al piano, la boca es demasiado grande y esos labios denotan una sensualidad extrañamente blanda y casi maligna. Pero cuando sonríe, es encantadora.

Joachim y Bertrand habían sido invitados a un té musical. Un viejo vecino de la hacienda y el pobre maestro acompañaban a Elisabeth en el trío de Spohr, y a Joachim le pareció que se debía a Elisabeth que las plateadas y cristalinas gotas del piano cayeran en el oscuro río de los dos instrumentos de cuerda. Le gustaba la música, aunque no entendía mucho de ella, pero ahora creía dilucidar su sentido: era algo que flotaba claro y puro sobre todas las cosas, como desde una nube de plata, y dejaba caer sobre la tierra gotas frías y limpias desde las alturas divinas. Y tal vez existiera únicamente para Elisabeth, aunque también Bertrand, como él sabía desde la academia, tocaba un poco el violín. No, no parecía que Bertrand pretendiera conquistar a Elisabeth a través de la música. Había contestado a la pregunta sobre sus dotes de violinista en forma evasiva y con un gesto desdeñoso, y pudo ser pura hipocresía —desde luego el tono sonaba a cinismo— que en el camino de vuelta no encontrara nada mejor que decir que: «¡Si por lo menos no hubiera tocado este Spohr horrendo y aburrido!».

Habían acordado un paseo a caballo; Joachim y Bertrand fueron a buscar a Elisabeth. Joachim montaba el caballo de Helmuth, que volvía a ser de su propiedad. Galoparon por los campos de rastrojos, en los que aún había gavillas, y después doblaron a trote corto por el estrecho camino del bosque. Joachim dejó que cabalgaran ante él su invitado y Elisabeth y, mientras los seguía, ella le pareció en su largo y negro traje de montar todavía más alta y delgada que de costumbre. Le hubiera gustado mirar hacia otra parte, pero ella no mantenía una actitud impecable sobre el caballo y esto atraía su atención; se mantenía un poco demasiado inclinada hacia delante y, cuando en el trote subía y bajaba, tocaba ligeramente la silla y de nuevo se levantaba, a él le venía a la mente su despedida en la estación, y el despreciable deseo de poderla codiciar como mujer lo atormentó de nuevo, doblemente despreciable, desde que el padre, y por añadidura en presencia de Bertrand, había hablado de visita a la novia. Pero casi era todavía más espantoso que también los padres de Elisabeth, su propia madre incluso, lo miraran como objeto del deseo amoroso de la hija, lo ofrecieran a ella, convencidos todos de que podían disponer de estos deseos amorosos, deseos que se realizarían y nada podía hacer fracasar. Desde luego detrás de todo esto se escondía algo más verdadero y profundo, una idea confusa de la que Joachim no quería saber nada, aunque sentía que se le secaba la boca y se le encendía el rostro; era confuso pero indignante atreverse a imputarle tales cosas a Elisabeth, él se avergonzaba ante ella y por ella. Que sea para Bertrand, pensó, y olvidó que cometía así el mismo pecado que acababa de desechar con tanta indignación. Pero de repente careció de importancia, de repente fue como si Bertrand no entrara en la cuenta: era tan femenino con su pelo ondulado, en cierto modo fraternal, una asistencia fraternal, a la que tal vez se podía confiar a Elisabeth. Evidentemente no era verdad, pero fue por un momento tranquilizador. Además, ¿por qué es ella en realidad hermosa?, y contempló su cuerpo que se movía arriba y abajo y cuyo centro de gravedad volvía a posarse siempre en la silla. Y descubrió que no es la belleza, sino más bien la falta de belleza, lo que provoca el deseo carnal; pero también apartó esta idea, y mientras seguía teniendo presente la escena de la subida al tren en la estación, se refugió en Ruzena, cuyas muchas imperfecciones la hacían tan encantadora. Dejó que su caballo se pusiera al paso, a fin de agrandar la distancia que lo separaba de los otros dos, y sacó del bolsillo interior de la chaqueta la última carta de Ruzena. El papel olía al perfume que él le había regalado y Joachim respiró el efluvio de la desordenada intimidad de su unión. Sí, aquel era su lugar, él quería estar allí; se sintió voluntariamente excluido de la sociedad y sin embargo rechazado, se sintió indigno de Elisabeth. Ciertamente Bertrand era su cómplice, pero tenía las manos más limpias, y al comprenderlo así, Joachim comprendió también por qué Bertrand les había tratado siempre, a él y a Ruzena, como de arriba abajo, como un tío o como un médico, y por qué le ocultaba sus propios secretos. Nadie revela los secretos de un padre; era justo que así fuera, y por eso aquel hombre podía y debía cabalgar allá adelante junto a Elisabeth, indigno también, pero mejor que él. De repente se acordó de Helmuth. Y, como queriendo al menos acercar a ellos el caballo de

Helmuth, lo puso al trote. Los cascos golpeaban suavemente el suelo del bosque y cuando aplastaban una ramita se oía el agudo crujido de la madera. El cuero de la silla crujía agradablemente y de la oscura profundidad del follaje soplaba fresca la brisa.

Los alcanzó al borde de un claro alargado, en suave pendiente. El frescor del bosque quedaba allí como cortado y se olía el sol sobre la hierba. Elisabeth ahuyentó con el mango de la fusta los tábanos que se habían posado sobre la piel de su caballo, y el animal, que conocía el camino, estaba intranquilo, porque esperaba el galope a través del claro. Joachim se sintió superior a Bertrand; por más que se hubieran extendido sus negocios, en la oficina no se entrena uno para saltar obstáculos. Elisabeth señaló un zarzal, un seto, que solía elegir para sus saltos, un tronco caído, un foso. No eran difíciles. Dejaron al palafrenero en el límite del claro; Elisabeth tomó la delantera y Joachim se quedó otra vez el último, no solo por cortesía, sino también porque quería ver saltar a Bertrand. El prado no había sido aún segado y la hierba siseaba aguda y suave bajo las patas de los caballos. Elisabeth se dirigió primero al foso; era una pequeñez y no podía sorprender que Bertrand saltara sobre él. Pero cuando Bertrand salvó también impecablemente el seto, Joachim se irritó de verdad: el tronco era demasiado fácil, no cabía poner esperanzas en él. El caballo de Joachim, que quería alcanzar a los otros caballos, tiró con fuerza de las riendas, y Joachim tuvo que contenerlo para mantener la distancia. Ahora venía el tronco; Elisabeth y Bertrand lo habían salvado con facilidad, casi con elegancia, y Joachim dio rienda suelta a su caballo. Y no obstante, en el momento de iniciar el salto, lo retuvo de pronto, el porqué le resultó siempre inexplicable, el caballo tropezó con el tronco, cayó de lado y rodó sobre él por la hierba. Todo ocurrió naturalmente en un abrir y cerrar de ojos y, cuando los otros dos se volvieron, él, que no había soltado las riendas, y el caballo estaban tranquilamente de pie uno junto al otro ante el tronco. «¿Qué ha pasado?» Ni él mismo lo sabía; examinó las patas del caballo: cojeaba de una pata delantera, había que llevarlo a casa. La mano de Dios, pensó Joachim: él se había caído y no Bertrand, y era justo que ahora tuviera que irse dejándole a Elisabeth. Cuando Elisabeth propuso que él tomara el caballo del palafrenero y enviara a este a casa con el animal lesionado, él, bajo la impresión del juicio de Dios, no aceptó. A fin de cuentas era el caballo de Helmuth y no podía confiarlo a cualquiera. Volvió a casa al paso y decidió regresar a Berlín cuanto antes.

Cabalgaban uno junto al otro por el camino del bosque. Aunque el palafrenero los seguía a corta distancia, Elisabeth tenía la sensación de que Joachim los había dejado solos, y la sensación era sofocante. Tal vez notaba la mirada de Bertrand posada en su rostro. Tiene una boca muy curiosa, se dijo Bertrand, y me encanta la transparencia de sus ojos. Sería una amante frágil y excitante pero incómoda. Sus manos, finas y delgadas, resultan demasiado grandes para una mujer. Es una adolescente sensual. Pero es encantadora. Para vencer su sofoco, Elisabeth inició una conversación, aunque había dicho lo mismo momentos antes:

—El señor Von Pasenow nos ha hablado mucho de usted y de sus grandes viajes.

—¿Sí? A mí me habló mucho de su gran belleza.

Elisabeth no contestó.

—¿No le gusta?

—No me gusta que se hable de esta supuesta belleza.

—Usted es muy bella.

Elisabeth, un tanto insegura, dijo:

—No le suponía de esos que hacen la corte a las mujeres.

Es más inteligente de lo que creía, pensó Bertrand, y replicó:

—Yo no dejaría que mis labios pronunciaran esta horrible expresión, ni siquiera en el caso de que quisiera ofender. Pero yo no le hago a usted la corte; usted sabe de sobra lo hermosa que es.

—Entonces, ¿por qué me lo dice?

—Porque no la volveré a ver.

Elisabeth le miró sorprendida.

—Naturalmente a usted no le gusta que se hable de su belleza, porque tras el galanteo presiente una petición de mano. Pero si me voy y no la veo nunca más, lógicamente no puedo pedir su mano y tengo derecho a decirle cosas bonitas.

Elisabeth no pudo contener la risa:

—Es espantoso que solo puedan oírse cosas bonitas en boca de un extraño.

—Por lo menos solo pueden creerse cuando las dice un extraño. En la familiaridad reside de antemano un germen de injusticia e insinceridad.

—De ser cierto esto, sería realmente terrible.

—Claro que es cierto, pero no es ni mucho menos terrible. La familiaridad es la manera más alevosa y en realidad más vil de pretender la mano de una mujer. En lugar de decirle a usted sencillamente que se la

desea porque es muy hermosa, se intenta primero deslizarse subrepticiamente en su confianza, para apoderarse en cierto modo de usted casi sin que se dé cuenta.

Elisabeth reflexionó un momento, luego dijo:

—¿Y no se oculta algo brutal tras sus palabras?

—No, puesto que me marcho… El extraño tiene derecho a decir la verdad.

—Tengo miedo a todo lo extraño.

—Porque sucumbe a ello. Es usted muy hermosa, Elisabeth. ¿Puedo llamarla así durante esta hora?

Cabalgaron juntos en silencio. Entonces ella dio con las palabras precisas, al decir:

—¿Qué quiere usted en realidad?

—Nada.

—Entonces todo esto es absurdo.

—Yo quiero lo mismo que aquel que le hace la corte y por eso le dice que es usted bonita, pero yo soy más sincero.

—No me gusta que me hagan la corte.

—Tal vez odia usted únicamente la forma insincera en que lo hacen.

—¿No es usted menos sincero todavía que los demás?

—Yo me voy de aquí.

—¿Y eso qué prueba?

—Entre otras cosas, mi pudor.

—¿Pudor?

—Pretender a una mujer significa ofrecérsele como el bípedo respirante que uno es, y esto es impúdico. Y es muy posible, aunque no probable, que por eso odie usted que la cortejen.

—No lo sé.

—El amor es algo absoluto, Elisabeth, y cuando lo absoluto tiene que manifestarse en lo terrenal, cae siempre en el pathos, precisamente porque no puede ser demostrado. Y al volverse tan espantosamente terrenal, el pathos resulta siempre ridículo, el caballero que cae de rodillas ante usted para que satisfaga todos sus deseos; si uno la ama a usted tiene que evitar esto.

¿Quería él decir acaso que la amaba? Cuando calló, ella lo miró interrogativa; pareció que él lo había comprendido:

—En realidad solo hay un pathos y se llama eternidad. Y como no hay ninguna eternidad positiva para los seres humanos, tiene que hacerse negativa y significa nunca-volver-a-verse. Si yo me voy, la eternidad está ahí; entonces está usted eternamente lejos y yo puedo decir que la amo.

—No diga cosas tan graves.

—Tal vez es una gran lucidez del sentimiento lo que me obliga a hablarle así. Pero quizá es también algo de odio y de resentimiento lo que hace que la obligue a escuchar este monólogo, celos tal vez, porque usted se queda aquí y sigue viviendo…

—¿Celos realmente?

—Sí, celos, y un poco de orgullo. Porque también es el deseo de dejar caer una piedra en el pozo de su alma, para que descanse allí imperecedera.

—Y así quiere penetrar también usted en mi intimidad.

—Es posible. Pero aún es mayor mi deseo de que la piedra se convierta algún día para usted en un talismán.

—¿Cuándo?

—Cuando se arrodille ante usted aquel de quien yo estoy celoso ya ahora y con este gesto anticuado le ofrezca su proximidad corporal: entonces el recuerdo de una, digamos, aséptica forma de amor podría hacerle recordar que en el amor tras cualquier gesto estetizante se oculta una rudeza todavía mayor.

—¿Dice usted esto a todas las mujeres de las que se aleja?

—Habría que decirlo a todas, pero generalmente yo parto antes de tener ocasión.

Elisabeth miró pensativa la crin de su caballo. Luego dijo:

—No sé, pero todo esto me parece extraordinariamente poco natural y fuera de lugar.

—Si piensa usted en la propagación del género humano, entonces sí que es poco natural. Pero ¿encuentra usted más natural que algún día con un hombre cualquiera que vive ahora en cualquier parte, que come, bebe y atiende sus negocios en cualquier parte, y al que usted conocerá por una tonta casualidad, y que le dirá cuando la ocasión se presente que es usted hermosa, y que hincará una rodilla en el suelo para decirlo, le parece a usted más natural que con este hombre, tras salvar algunas formalidades, tenga usted hijos? ¿Encuentra esto natural?

—Cállese ya, es terrible… es espantoso.

—Claro que es terrible, pero no porque yo lo diga, porque es mucho más terrible que usted sea capaz y esté casi dispuesta a vivirlo, pero no a oírlo.

Elisabeth contenía el llanto; finalmente logró decir:

—Pero ¿por qué, en nombre de Dios, tengo que oírlo…? Cállese, por favor.

—¿Qué teme usted, Elisabeth?

—Ya sin esto tengo tanto miedo —dijo ella en voz baja.

—¿De qué?

De lo extraño, del otro, de lo que vendrá… no sé cómo explicarlo. Alimento la oscura esperanza de que aquello que ha de venir me resulte tan familiar como todo lo que ahora me rodea. Mis padres forman una unidad. Pero usted quiere quitarme esta esperanza.

—Y por miedo al peligro se niega usted a verlo. Habría que sacudirla, a fin de que por cansancio, por convencionalismo, por oscuridad, no deje que su destino se le escape de las manos y se deshaga en polvo o en agua o algo así… Elisabeth, yo quiero para usted lo mejor.

Elisabeth dio de nuevo con las palabras precisas, al decir despacio, titubeante, casi sin querer:

—Entonces, ¿por qué no se queda usted?

—Yo he llegado hasta usted empujado simplemente por el azar. Y si me quedara, sería como apoderarme por asalto de sus sentimientos, justo aquello contra lo cual quería prevenirla; un asalto un poco más aséptico, es cierto, pero asalto al fin.

—¿Qué debo hacer?

—Esto solo puede contestarse negativamente: nada que no pueda ser afirmado por usted hasta lo más profundo de sus vivencias. Solo aquel que se somete libremente y sin trabas al imperativo de sus sentimientos y de su ser puede alcanzar la plenitud… y disculpe usted el pathos.

—Nadie me ayuda.

—No, usted está sola, tan sola como en su muerte solitaria.

—No es verdad. No es verdad lo que usted dice. Nunca estuve sola, mis padres tampoco lo están. Usted habla así porque quiere estar solo… ¿o porque le gusta atormentarme…?

—Elisabeth, es usted tan hermosa que tal vez para usted la plenitud y la perfección radican ya en su belleza. ¡Cómo podría atormentarla! Pero todo es verdad y es aún más desagradable.

—No me atormente.

—En alguna parte de todo ser humano se esconde la loca esperanza de que el poco erotismo que nos ha sido otorgado puede tender este puente. Guárdese del pathos de lo erótico.

—¿Contra qué me previene usted ahora?

—Todo pathos tiende a prometer misterios y a cumplir la promesa con una mecánica. Quisiera saberla a usted preservada de este tipo de amor.

—Es usted muy pobre.

—¿Porque muestro mis bolsillos vacíos? Guárdese de todos aquellos que no los muestran.

—No, no es eso, siento que es usted más digno de compasión que los otros, incluso que aquellos a los que usted alude…

—He de prevenirla otra vez. En estos asuntos no sienta jamás compasión. Un amor por compasión no es mejor que un amor comprado.

—¡Oh!

—Sí, usted no quiere oírlo, Elisabeth. Digámoslo de otro modo: el que peca por compasión presenta después la cuenta más despiadada.

Elisabeth lo miró casi hostilmente:

—Yo no siento ninguna compasión por usted.

—Pero tampoco tiene que mirarme tan mal, como si casi fuera mejor que lo hiciera.

—¿Por qué mejor?

Bertrand calló. Al cabo de un rato dijo:

—Escuche, Elisabeth, hay que llevar la sinceridad hasta el final. No me gusta decir estas cosas. Pero yo la amo. Está comprobado con toda la seriedad y con toda la sinceridad de que uno es capaz en estas cuestiones del sentimiento. Y sé también que usted podría amarme…

—Por el amor de Dios, cállese ya…

—¿Por qué? No sobrevaloro en absoluto esos vagos estados emotivos, ni tampoco me pondré patético. Pero ningún hombre puede apagar esta loca esperanza de encontrar todavía el místico puente del amor. Y también por esto debo marcharme. Existe un solo pathos auténtico, el de la lejanía, el del dolor… Si uno quiere que el puente sea sólido, tiene que tensarlo, ya que no puede cargarlo con demasiado peso. Y cuando…

—¡Oh, cállese!

—Y cuando sin embargo la necesidad se hace más fuerte que todo cuanto espontáneamente le oponemos, cuando la tensión de un anhelo indescriptible llega a ser tan poderosa que amenaza con despedazar el mundo, entonces queda la esperanza de que los pobres destinos individuales del hombre emerjan del fárrago del azar, de una melancolía chata y sentimental, de la familiaridad mecánica y casual.

Y como si hablara consigo mismo y no con Elisabeth, prosiguió:

—Creo, y es una fe profunda, que solo una terrible superación de lo extraño, solo cuando, por decirlo así, ha sido llevado hasta lo infinito, puede convertirse en su contrario, en el conocimiento absoluto, y dar la flor que se balancea ante él como meta inalcanzable del amor y sin embargo lo satisface: el misterio de la unidad. De un lento mutuo acostumbrarse y familiarizarse no surge ningún misterio.

Elisabeth lloraba.

Él dijo en voz baja:

—Quisiera que tú vivieras y sufrieras el amor únicamente de esta forma última e inaccesible. Y aunque no fuera conmigo, no estaría celoso. Pero sufro y me siento celoso e impotente, cuando pienso que sucumbirás ante algo muy inferior. ¿Lloras porque la perfección es inaccesible? Entonces tienes motivo para llorar. Oh, te quiero, deseo ardientemente hundirme en tu extrañeza, deseo ardientemente que tú fueras lo definitivo y lo predestinado…

Ahora cabalgaban de nuevo juntos en silencio; los caballos salieron del bosque y descendieron por un atajo hasta el camino principal que debían tomar para volver a la casa. Ante el camino polvoriento, que yacía blanco bajo el sol y el cielo blanquecino, él detuvo su caballo y, para poder expresarlo todavía a la sombra de los árboles, dijo de nuevo en voz muy baja y como a título de despedida: «Te quiero… te quiero, es fantástico». A los dos les parecía imposible seguir juntos en el seco y soleado camino, y Elisabeth se sintió agradecida cuando él se detuvo y dijo: «Ahora intentaré alcanzar a nuestro accidentado jinete…», y más abajo: «La paz sea contigo». Ella le tendió la mano, él se inclinó sobre ella y Elisabeth oyó de nuevo «La paz sea contigo». Ella no respondió, pero, cuando él se alejaba ya, lo llamó: «Señor Von Bertrand». Él volvió atrás; Elisabeth titubeó un instante, después dijo «Adiós». Le hubiera gustado decir la paz sea contigo, pero le pareció teatral y fuera de lugar. Cuando unos instantes más tarde él miró hacia atrás, casi no pudo distinguir cuál de las dos figuras era Elisabeth y cuál el palafrenero; estaban ya demasiado lejos y el sol era cegador.

El criado Peter estaba en la terraza de la casa señorial de Lestow y hacía sonar el gong. La baronesa había introducido la costumbre de anunciar así las horas de las comidas, desde que estuvo en Inglaterra con su marido. Y aunque el criado Peter se servía de este instrumento desde hacía varios años, sentía siempre un poco de vergüenza al provocar aquel ruido pueril, sobre todo porque el sonido llegaba hasta la calle del pueblo y le había valido el sobrenombre de Tamborilero. Por eso tocaba el gong con discreción, le arrancaba solo unas pocas notas apagadas, que rodaban redondas por el silencio del parque, y el resto era un algo delgado, amusical y de latón, que se extinguía en un danzar sutil.

Cabalgando a paso lento por la calle del pueblo al mediodía, Elisabeth oyó que el criado Peter hacía sonar suavemente el gong en la terraza y exhortaba a cambiarse de ropa. Pero no alteró el paso del caballo y, si no hubiera estado tan sumida en sus pensamientos, le habría llamado la atención que hoy, por primera vez en su vida, sintiera una especie de aversión hacia el almuerzo en común, y que el regreso a casa por el tranquilo y hermoso parque, la entrada entre las dos casitas de los porteros, le encogieran el corazón. Había surgido en ella un inquietante anhelo de lejanía y junto con este anhelo un pensamiento absurdo, doblemente absurdo en aquel calor agobiante del mediodía: que la vida de Bertrand peligraba en ese clima demasiado duro y que por eso tenía que estar siempre huyendo y despidiéndose. Los tañidos del gong se habían extinguido. Elisabeth descabalgó en el patio, el palafrenero le sostuvo el estribo y ella entró a pasos rápidos en la casa: con los faldones del traje de montar sobre el brazo, subió los escalones, siguió el camino habitual, pero un poco como en sueños. Se sentía invadida por un delicado coraje, una alegría un poco triste de ir donde quisiera, tomar su destino en sus propias manos y determinarlo; pero todo esto no fue muy lejos y se detuvo en seco al pensar lo que dirían sus padres si aparecía en el comedor en traje de montar. También Joachim von Pasenow era de aquellos a los que podría chocar esta contravención. El perrito Bello bajó las escaleras ladrando de alegría, Elisabeth le dio mecánicamente la fusta, pero no sonrió ante el orgullo con que él la precedió llevando la fusta al *boudoir,* y por más que Bello la depositara gentilmente a sus pies, mirándola pensativo, como si encontrara la plenitud en su belleza, Elisabeth no lo acarició, sino que se dirigió al espejo, se miró en él largo rato sin reconocerse, veía solo la delgada y oscura silueta, y fue como si la imagen del espejo, como si ella misma escapara hacia una inmovilidad, que solo empezó a disgregarse lentamente cuando entró la criada para ayudarla como todos los días a desabrocharse el traje desmontar. Pero cuando la muchacha se arrodilló para sacarle las botas, cuando el pie extendido se liberó del tubo de cuero con una sensación de alivio y frescor, y, metido en su media de seda negra, se

apoyó delgado en la rodilla de la doncella, ella buscó de nuevo en el espejo la imagen evadida, que era a la vez una huida hacia alguien, alguien que vivía en alguna parte, y que tal vez algún día se arrodillaría ante ella. La fusta seguía aún sobre la alfombra. Elisabeth intentó imaginarse a Bertrand en la estación vestido con una chaqueta de uniforme larga y cuadrada, una espada al cinto, y que el tren al partir podía arrastrarlo. Había en esta idea una especie de alegría maligna, pero también un miedo angustioso y nunca sentido. Echó la cabeza hacia atrás y se llevó las manos a las sienes, como si con este gesto pudiera liberarse y desasirse del imperativo de una desacostumbrada violencia. «Pero si no ha sucedido nada», decía algo en ella, y no comprendía aquella vaga tensión, que sin embargo parecía tan extraordinariamente clara que casi podía expresarse en palabras: despedazar el mundo. Desde luego no estaba del todo claro, pero había surgido un límite fronterizo, y lo que antes constituyera una unidad, este mundo de lo cerrado, se derrumbaba ahora, y los padres estaban al otro lado del límite. Detrás se ocultaba el miedo, aquel miedo del que los padres querían protegerla, como si de ello dependiera toda su vida en común: aquello tan temido había hecho ahora irrupción, de modo extrañamente estremecedor e inquietante, y sin embargo nada temible. Se podía tratar de tú a un extraño; eso era todo. Y era tan poco que Elisabeth casi se entristeció. Se levantó resuelta; no, no se quiere entregar a una melancolía chata y sentimental. Se dirige al espejo y pone sus cabellos en orden.

Al pie de la escalinata cuelga de su soporte de ébano el gong de bronce amarillo pálido, adornado con simples fiorituras chinas. Una pieza auténtica, que el barón adquirió en Londres. El criado Peter sostiene en la mano el mazo con la blanda bola de cuero gris; mira el reloj y espera. Han pasado catorce minutos desde la primera señal y, cuando la aguja del reloj alcance los quince minutos, el criado Peter dará tres discretos golpes en la placa de bronce.

III

Al día siguiente, Bertrand se excusó por no acudir al desayuno en común, buscó luego a Joachim y le comunicó que, lamentándolo mucho, tenía que partir a la mañana siguiente, porque lo habían mandado llamar. En un primer momento, Joachim se sintió aliviado: «Yo me voy con usted», dijo, y miró agradecido a Bertrand, que evidentemente había renunciado a Elisabeth. Y para demostrarle que él, por su parte, también renunciaba, añadió como consuelo: «No sé qué podría retenerme aquí».

Joachim fue a comunicárselo a su padre. Pero cuando el señor Von Pasenow se sobresaltó y preguntó receloso con su habitual indiscreción: «¿Cómo es posible? Desde anteayer no ha recibido ninguna carta», el que se sobresaltó fue Joachim: claro, ¿cómo era posible? ¿Qué habría impulsado a Bertrand a renunciar? Y con la amargura de ponerse al mismo nivel de indiscreción que su padre al plantearse estas preguntas, surgió también la visión de una agradable victoria: Bertrand había recibido calabazas, porque Elisabeth lo amaba a él, a Joachim von Pasenow. Claro que era casi casi inimaginable que alguien se atreviera a declararse a una dama con tanta rapidez, en un periquete, podría decirse. Pero tratándose de un hombre de negocios, que cree tener posibilidad de conquistar a una rica heredera, todo era posible. Joachim no pudo seguir con sus elucubraciones, porque el viejo había adoptado de pronto una extraña actitud: hundido en el sillón de su escritorio, miraba hoscamente ante sí y murmuraba: «Perro, más que perro… Ha faltado a su palabra». Después fijó la mirada en Joachim y gritó: «Largo de aquí, tú y tu arrogante amigo… Has conspirado con él». «¡Pero, padre!» «¡Fuera de aquí los dos, largo!» Se había levantado de un salto y con paso desigual siguió a su hijo, que se retiraba hacia la puerta. Y cada vez que se detenía, estiraba la cabeza hacia delante y siseaba: «¡Largo de aquí los dos!». Cuando Joachim estuvo en el pasillo el viejo cerró la puerta de un portazo, pero la volvió a abrir enseguida y asomó la cabeza: «Y dile que no se atreva a escribirme. Dile que eso ya no tiene ningún valor para mí». La puerta golpeó el marco y Joachim oyó girar la llave en la cerradura.

Encontró a la madre en el jardín; no se alteró demasiado: «Es siempre parco de palabras, pero estos últimos días parecía enfadado contigo. Creo que te reprocha que no hayas dejado todavía el servicio. De todos modos, es extraño». Cuando entraron en la casa, la madre añadió: «Tal vez le ofendió que trajeras tan pronto un invitado; pienso que será mejor que yo vaya antes a ver cómo está». Joachim la acompañó arriba: la puerta del pasillo estaba cerrada y cuando ella llamó no hubo respuesta. Resultaba un poco extraño y fueron al gran salón, ya que cabía en lo posible que el padre hubiera abandonado su cuarto. A través de una serie de habitaciones vacías, llegaron al gabinete de trabajo y no estaba cerrado con llave; la señora Von Pasenow abrió y Joachim vio al padre inmóvil, sentado ante el escritorio, la pluma en la mano. No se movió tampoco cuando la señora Von Pasenow se acercó y se inclinó sobre él. La pluma había apretado tanto el papel que se había roto; y en el papel se leía: «Yo desheredo por su deslealtad a mi…», y seguía la mancha de tinta, provocada por la pluma al romperse. «Por el amor de Dios, ¿qué ha sucedido?», pero él no respondió. La madre lo miró desamparada; cuando se dio cuenta de que también el tintero estaba volcado, cogió rápidamente el secante e intentó absorber con él el líquido derramado. El viejo la apartó de un codazo y entonces vio a Joachim en la puerta, sonrió irónicamente y trató de seguir escribiendo con la pluma rota. Cuando la pluma se atascó de nuevo sobre el papel y lo rompió, el señor Von Pasenow lanzó un gemido, levantó el índice en dirección a su hijo y gritó: «¡Fuera de mi vista!». Al mismo tiempo intentó levantarse, pero aparentemente no pudo, pues se derrumbó de nuevo sobre sí mismo, y mientras él, sin prestar atención a la tinta derramada, se apoyaba en el escritorio con la cabeza entre los brazos, como un niño que llora, Joachim cuchicheó a la madre: «Mandaré a buscar al médico», y bajó corriendo para enviar un mensajero al pueblo.

El médico había venido y había metido al señor Von Pasenow en la cama. Le administró bromuro y habló de un tratamiento con agua fría; seguro que la muerte del hijo había tenido como consecuencia un colapso nervioso. Sí, esta fue la banal explicación del médico. Pero no era una explicación. Había algo más detrás de todo aquello y no podía ser casualidad: la caída del caballo de Helmuth había sido como una primera advertencia, y ahora que, a pesar de todo, se vislumbraba un triunfo sobre Bertrand, ahora que Elisabeth había despreciado a Bertrand por él, y él se disponía a ser infiel a Bertrand y a Ruzena,

aparentemente para cumplir la voluntad de su padre, ahora se presentaba la desgracia. ¡Un cómplice que traiciona a su cómplice y es acusado con razón por el padre de conspirar con Bertrand! Toda esta urdimbre ¿no se desmembraría de nuevo, no terminaría la traición en contratraición? ¡Y Bertrand se apoderaría otra vez de Ruzena, demostrando así al padre que ya no era cómplice de su hijo y vengándose porque Elisabeth lo había despreciado! Y en la horrible y sucia sospecha que le inspiraba el viaje de Bertrand a Berlín, Joachim vio solamente su propio viaje aplazado hasta fecha indefinida, y esto lo torturaba más que la preocupación por el padre enfermo. El caos se resolvía para volver a engendrar un nuevo caos. ¿Lo había querido así su padre, cuando lo presionó para que fuera a Lestow? De todas formas, era imposible saber lo que había ocurrido entre el padre y Bertrand. Tal vez todo se hubiera aclarado, si él hubiera podido decirle algo a Bertrand de las confusas alusiones de su padre, pero tuvo que limitarse a comunicarle la repentina enfermedad. Le rogó que explicara a Ruzena la situación; de todos modos, él iría a Berlín al cabo de pocos días para prorrogar el permiso y demás. «Bien», dijo Bertrand, cuando Joachim lo acompañó a la estación, «bien», pero ¿qué ocurriría con Ruzena? Naturalmente había que confiar en el pronto restablecimiento del señor Von Pasenow, pero no por eso dejaría de ser cada vez más necesaria la presencia de Joachim en Stolpin. «Habría que buscarle a Ruzena», opinó, «una ocupación decente, que le gustara: esto la ayudaría un poco a superar las dificultades que se le avecinan.» Joachim se sintió ofendido, al fin y al cabo esto era asunto suyo; dijo titubeando: «El teatro, donde usted mismo la ha metido, ya le gusta». Bertrand hizo un gesto despectivo con la mano, y Joachim lo miró fijamente sin comprender. «Pero no se preocupe, Pasenow, ya encontraremos algo.» Y aunque para Joachim esta preocupación no había adquirido cuerpo hasta aquel momento, se alegró realmente de que Bertrand lo librase de ella con tanta facilidad.

Desde que el padre estaba enfermo y pasaba aún la mayor parte del día en la cama, la vida se había simplificado extrañamente; se podía reflexionar sobre muchas cosas con más tranquilidad y muchas cuestiones se clarificaban o, al menos, parecía posible abordarlas. Pero existía entonces un problema casi insoluble y no servía de nada intentar hallar la solución en el rostro de Elisabeth, porque precisamente ahí radicaba el enigma. Apoyada en el respaldo de la silla, miraba de vez en cuando el paisaje otoñal, y el rostro echado hacia atrás, formando casi un ángulo recto con el cuello, era como un tejado irregular sobre este cuello. Tal vez pudiera también decirse que flotaba sobre el cáliz del cuello como una hoja o que lo cubría como una tapadera plana, pues en realidad ya no era un rostro, sino solo una parte del cuello, que surgía del cuello, recordando muy vagamente la cabeza de una serpiente. Joachim reseguía el contorno del cuello, el mentón destacaba como una colina y tras ella se extendía el paisaje del rostro. Suaves yacían los bordes del cráter de la boca, oscura la cavidad de la nariz, dividida por una blanca columna. El boscaje de las cejas brotaba frondoso y tras el claro de la frente, marcada por finos surcos, se encontraba el lindero del bosque. Joachim tuvo que plantearse una vez más la cuestión de qué era lo que hacía deseable a una mujer, pero no halló respuesta; la pregunta seguía confusa y sin solución. Entornó los párpados y miró por la hendidura el paisaje abierto de aquel rostro. Entonces el rostro se fundió en el verdadero paisaje: el lindero de los cabellos se continuaba en la fronda amarilla del bosque, y las bolas de cristal que adornaban los rosales del jardín brillaban al unísono con la piedra que, a la sombra de la mejilla —oh, ¿era todavía una mejilla?— relumbraba habitualmente como un pendiente. Era pavoroso y tranquilizador a un tiempo y, cuando la mirada fundía lo separado en algo extrañamente unificado e imposible ya de diferenciar, se sentía uno advertido de algo, convertido en algo que, al margen de todo convencionalismo, yacía lejos en la infancia, y la cuestión sin resolver parecía surgida del recuerdo como una advertencia.

Estaban sentados en el sombreado jardín de la hostería; el palafrenero se ocupaba de los caballos en la parte trasera del patio. Sobre ellos, en el rumor de las hojas, se escuchaba la voz de septiembre. Porque ya no era el susurro claro y suave del follaje primaveral, y tampoco era ya el sonido del verano: si en verano los árboles susurran simplemente, podríamos decir que sin matices, en los primeros días del otoño se mezcla a este susurro una argentada agudeza metálica, como si un sonido amplio y unitario debiera disolverse en distintas vetas. Cuando empieza el otoño, las horas del mediodía son muy silenciosas: el sol arde todavía veraniego y cuando, procedente de no se sabe dónde, se filtra a través del ramaje una brisa más leve y más fresca, parece que se expande en el aire un hálito primaveral. Las hojas, que caen desde la copa del árbol sobre la tosca mesa de la hostería, no están aún amarillas, pero son frágiles y quebradizas pese a su verdor, y el resplandor del sol veraniego parece entonces doblemente precioso. La barca del pescador yace en el agua con la proa contra la corriente: el agua se desliza sin olas, como si la empujaran en forma de grandes tablas. Estos días de otoño carecen de la somnolencia de los mediodías del verano; por todas partes se expande una suave y expectante quietud.

Elisabeth dijo: «¿Por qué se vive aquí? En el sur hay días como este durante todo el año». Joachim vio ante sí el rostro meridional del italiano con la barbita negra. Pero en el rostro de Elisabeth no se podía encontrar ya siquiera el de un italiano o el de cualquier tipo de hermano, tan poco humanos y tan paisajísticos se habían tornado sus rasgos. Joachim intentó hallar de nuevo su forma habitual, pero cuando repentinamente esta forma reapareció en su rostro, la nariz volvió a ser nariz, la boca volvió a ser boca, el

ojo volvió a ser ojo, el cambio fue nuevamente pavoroso y solo le tranquilizó que ella llevara el pelo liso y no excesivamente ondulado. «¿Por qué? ¿No le gusta el invierno?» «Su amigo tiene razón; hay que viajar», fue la respuesta. «Ahora quiere ir a la India», dijo Joachim, y pensó en el pueblo color de aceituna y en Ruzena. ¿Por qué no se le había ocurrido nunca irse de viaje con Ruzena? Notó la mirada de Elisabeth en su rostro, se sintió pillado en falta y volvió la cabeza. Pero si alguien tenía la culpa de este afán viajero, era Bertrand. Como tenía que resarcirse y aturdirse por la pérdida de su vida ordenada mediante negocios y viajes exóticos, resultaba contagioso, y, si Elisabeth hablaba del suˆ, tal vez lamentaba —a pesar de haber rechazado a Bertrand— no haber partido con él. Oyó la voz de Elisabeth: «¿Cuánto tiempo hace ya que nos conocemos?». Él echó cuentas, no podía decirse con exactitud: cuando él tenía doce años y estaba de vacaciones en casa, sus padres lo llevaban a veces con ellos a Lestow. Y entonces Elisabeth casi ni había nacido. «Entonces lo he conocido a usted siempre, toda mi vida», constató Elisabeth, «pero nunca le vi en realidad; usted estaba para mí entre los adultos.» Joachim calló. «Y tampoco usted se fijó nunca en mí», añadió Elisabeth. Oh, claro que sí, pensó Joachim, claro que sí, cuando ella, repentina y sorprendentemente, se convirtió en una mujer. Elisabeth dijo: «Pero ahora tenemos casi la misma edad… ¿Cuándo es su cumpleaños?», y, sin esperar respuesta, continuó: «¿Recuerda usted todavía cómo era yo de niña?». Joachim tuvo que reflexionar; en el salón de la baronesa había un retrato de Elisabeth cuando niña y se anteponía insistentemente al recuerdo vivido. «Es curioso», dijo, «sé muy bien cómo era usted, pero…», quería decir que no podía hallar en su rostro el rostro infantil, aunque forzosamente tenía que estar en él, mas, al mirarla ahora, el rostro había desaparecido de nuevo totalmente de su rostro y solo se veían colinas y valles, cubiertos de algo que llamamos piel. Como si ella quisiera seguir sus pensamientos, dijo:

—Si me esfuerzo, puedo reconocer su rostro de muchacho a pesar del bigote —y se rió—, realmente es divertido; tengo que intentarlo también con mi padre.

—¿Puede usted verme también de viejo?

Elisabeth lo miró inquisitiva:

—Qué raro, eso no puedo hacerlo… un momento, sí puedo: se parecerá todavía más a su madre, tendrá una cara redonda y el bigote será más poblado y blanco… ¿Y yo como anciana? ¿Tendré un aspecto muy digno?

Joachim se declaró incapaz de imaginar tal cosa.

—No sea galante y dígamelo.

—Perdone, pero no me gusta. Es muy desagradable parecerse de pronto a los padres, o a un hermano, o a cualquier otra persona… Ya nada tiene sentido.

—¿También dice esto su amigo Bertrand?

—No, que yo sepa; ¿por qué lo cree así?

—Por nada, podría ser de esta opinión.

—No lo sé, pero me parece que Bertrand está tan ocupado con los hechos externos de su agitada vida que no presta ninguna atención a estas cosas. Nunca es del todo él mismo.

Elisabeth sonrió:

—¿Quiere usted decir que ve las cosas desde una gran distancia? ¿En cierta manera con los ojos de un extraño?

¿Qué pretendía decir ella con estas palabras? ¿A qué hacía alusión? Se despreció por esta curiosidad, se sintió poco caballero, claro que de pronto se dio cuenta de que tampoco era nada caballeresco dejar una mujer a otro, en lugar de protegerla, protegerla de todos los demás. En realidad estaba obligado a casarse con Elisabeth. Pero Elisabeth en cambio no daba ninguna impresión de infelicidad, cuando dijo: «Ha sido muy bonito, pero ahora tenemos que ir a comer, mis padres nos esperan».

Mientras cabalgaban hacia la casa y cuando divisaban ya la torre, Elisabeth pareció haber reflexionado sobre su conversación, porque dijo: «Desde luego es muy curioso que resulten inseparables lo familiar y lo extraño. Tal vez tenga usted razón al no querer saber nada de la vejez». Joachim, el pensamiento puesto en Ruzena, no comprendió bien sus palabras, pero esta vez no se planteó ningún problema.

Si había algo que contribuyó al restablecimiento del señor Von Pasenow, fue el correo. Una mañana, aún en cama, se le ocurrió: «¿Quién recoge la cartera del correo? ¿Joachim tal vez?». No, Joachim no se ocupaba de eso. El viejo refunfuñó que Joachim no se ocupaba absolutamente de nada, pero pareció tranquilizarse, hizo que lo levantaran y se dirigió lentamente a su cuarto de trabajo. Cuando llegó el mensajero, tuvo lugar el acostumbrado ritual, que ahora volvió a repetirse todos los días. Si la señora Von Pasenow estaba presente, lo oía lamentarse de que nadie escribiera. Preguntaba también con frecuencia si Joachim estaba en la hacienda, pero no quería verle. Y cuando oyó que Joachim se iría a Berlín unos días, dijo: «Hazle saber que se lo prohíbo». A veces perdía la memoria y se quejaba de que ni sus propios hijos le escribían, y a la señora Von Pasenow se le ocurrió que Joachim podía escribirle a su padre una carta de reconciliación. Joachim se acordó de que él y su hermano tenían que expresar sus buenos deseos, en los cumpleaños de sus padres, en un papel de cenefas con rosas; era una pesadilla. Se negó a repetir aquello y

afirmó que se marchaba. Este punto se podía ocultar a su padre.

Partió sin añoranza; si una vez le rebeló que se le impusiera un casamiento, ahora le sublevaba igualmente que su permanencia de tres días en Berlín le obligara a tres noches de amor con Ruzena. Lo encontraba también denigrante para la propia Ruzena. Hubiera preferido aplazar su reencuentro y, para que ella al menos no fuera a la estación, se abstuvo de comunicarle la hora de su llegada. Durante el viaje cayó en la cuenta de que tenía que llevarle un regalo; pero, como ni perdices ni otras piezas de caza eran apropiadas para el caso, no quedaba de todos modos otro recurso que buscar algo en Berlín; mejor, pues, que Ruzena no pudiera acudir a la estación. Se esforzó en idear un presente adecuado, pero su imaginación estaba embotada, no se le ocurría nada y dudaba entre unos guantes o un perfume; no importaba, en Berlín ya encontraría algo.

Una vez en casa, escribió ante todo una nota a Bertrand, que de seguro se alegraría de poder discutir finalmente con él los desagradables acontecimientos de los últimos días en Stolpin. Escribió también a Ruzena, y envió ambas cartas por un mensajero, encargándole que esperase respuesta. Se sintió de verdad en casa. El verano coleaba todavía tras las ventanas cerradas. Abrió media ventana y se alegró con la paz de la calle; caía la tarde. Era probable que lloviera por la noche, al oeste se alzaba un muro de nubes grises. Las parras que crecían a lo largo de las vallas de los jardines eran rojas, en las aceras yacían amarillas hojas de castaño y los caballos de los cuatro coches de punto de la esquina tenían las patas dobladas mansa, tristemente. Joachim se asomó a la ventana y vio que el ordenanza estaba abriendo las demás; si él también hubiera asomado la cabeza, Joachim le hubiera sonreído y le hubiera hecho un gesto de saludo a lo largo del muro. Y mientras el ordenanza deshacía el equipaje, Joachim permaneció en la ventana y contempló la tranquila calle y el apacible anochecer. Después entró de nuevo; las habitaciones se habían refrescado y solo en algunos puntos se mantenían en el aire pequeños fragmentos de verano; Joachim se sintió invadido por una dulce melancolía. Era muy agradable sentir de nuevo sobre sí el uniforme; paseó entre sus escasas propiedades, contempló los objetos y sus libros. Sí, este invierno leería más. Entonces se asustó, dentro de tres días tendría que abandonar todo aquello otra vez. Se sentó, como si así pudiera demostrar su asentamiento, mandó cerrar las ventanas y preparar té. Pasó algún tiempo. El ordenanza, al que casi había olvidado, regresó: el señor Von Bertrand no estaba en Berlín, pero se le esperaba en los próximos días, y la señora no le había dado ninguna respuesta, había dicho simplemente que venía enseguida. Para Joachim fue como si se le hubiera frustrado una pequeña ilusión; casi hubiera deseado que fuese al contrario y que fuera Bertrand quien acudiera inmediatamente. Además tenía que comprar todavía el regalo. Pero a los pocos minutos sonó el timbre; había llegado Ruzena. En las clases de natación de la academia había tenido miedo al trampolín, hasta que una vez el profesor lo lanzó de un empujón al agua; y entonces se sintió muy bien en ella y se rió. Ruzena entró como un torbellino y voló a sus brazos. Se estaba bien en el agua. Se sentaron con las manos enlazadas, intercambiaron besos y Ruzena habló sin cesar de cosas cuya relación él no conocía. Su malestar había desaparecido por completo y la felicidad habría sido casi total, si no hubiera aparecido con renovada agudeza el enojo por el regalo olvidado. Pero como Dios lo disponía todo para lo mejor, o al menos para lo bueno, lo llevó al armario donde descansaban los pañuelos de encaje, olvidados durante meses. Y mientras Ruzena, como de costumbre, preparaba la cena, Joachim buscó papel de seda y una cinta azul claro y puso el paquete bajo el plato de Ruzena. Y antes de que se dieran cuenta, estaban ya en la cama.

Hasta el día siguiente no se acordó de que debía marcharse muy pronto. Se lo dijo a Ruzena titubeando. Pero ella, en lugar de disgustarse o reaccionar violentamente como él temía, se limitó a decir con sencillez: «Ni hablar; tú te quedas». Joachim quedó perplejo; en realidad ella tenía razón, ¿por qué no había de quedarse? ¿Qué hechizo lo había obligado a vagar aturdido por la hacienda y a ocultarse de su padre? Además le parecía absolutamente necesario esperar a Bertrand en Berlín. Tal vez Ruzena le empujaba a cometer una incorrección, una especie de impuntualidad civil, pero le dio una pequeña sensación de libertad. Decidió consultarlo con la almohada y, como lo hizo en compañía de Ruzena, al día siguiente escribió a su madre que asuntos del servicio lo retenían en Berlín más tiempo del previsto; una carta parecida, que acompañaba a esta, debía entregarla, caso de creerlo conveniente, a su padre. Más tarde se dio cuenta de que esta medida carecía dé sentido, puesto que el padre recibía en propia mano toda la correspondencia. Pero era demasiado tarde; había echado ya la carta.

Se reincorporó al servicio, en la escuela de caballería. Un sargento de primera y un suboficial dirigían la instrucción, ambos con largos látigos en la mano, y a lo largo del muro avanzaban los reclutas a caballo vestidos con chaquetas de dril. Olía a cueva y la suave arena, en la que se hundían los pies, le recordó con un asomo de tristeza a Helmuth y la arena que había echado sobre su ataúd. El sargento hizo restallar el látigo y ordenó poner los caballos al trote. Las figuras de dril empezaron a subir y bajar rítmicamente a lo largo del muro. Elisabeth llegaría pronto a Berlín para la temporada de otoño. Pero no era verdad: nunca venían antes de octubre y tampoco la casa podía estar a punto. Y, en realidad, él esperaba a Bertrand y no a Elisabeth; naturalmente, era en él en quien estaba pensando. Le vio ante sí, cabalgando junto a Elisabeth,

ambos oscilando rítmicamente sobre sus monturas. Era asombroso hasta qué punto se había confundido entonces el rostro de Elisabeth con el paisaje y cómo él se había torturado para extraerlo de allí. Intentó comprobar si podía hacer lo mismo con el rostro de Bertrand, intentó imaginárselo cabalgando a lo largo del muro, elevándose y descendiendo sobre su montura, pero desistió; era una especie de sacrilegio, y se alegró de no haber vuelto a ver el rostro de Helmuth. El sargento ordenó poner los caballos al paso y trajeron blancos obstáculos y vallas a la pista. No pudo evitar el pensar en los payasos y comprendió de pronto lo que una vez le dijera Bertrand: que se defendía a la patria con un circo. Pero seguía siendo incomprensible que él se hubiera caído al saltar el tronco.

De nuevo pasó en coche por delante de la fábrica de maquinaria Borsig. También ahora había allí obreros. En realidad no quería volver a ver todo aquello. Él no pertenecía a aquel mundo y era superfluo distanciarse de él por medio de un abigarrado uniforme. Bertrand sí pertenecía a aquel mundo, tal vez en contra de su voluntad, pero la cuestión es que se había adaptado; por otra parte, tampoco quería saber nada más de Bertrand; lo mejor sería regresar a Stolpin. Sin embargo, hizo detener el coche ante la casa de Bertrand y le alegró saber que el señor Von Bertrand regresaría por la noche. Muy bien, en cualquier caso pasaría por allí aquella noche, y le dejó una nota anunciándole su visita.

Fueron al teatro, y en el escenario estaba Ruzena con sus pobres gestos de corista. En el entreacto Bertrand dijo: «Esto no es para ella, encontraremos otra cosa», y de nuevo Joachim tuvo la sensación de que se le ocultaba algo. Durante la cena, Bertrand se dirigió a Ruzena: «Dígame, Ruzena, ¿va usted pues a convertirse en una actriz famosa?». ¡Claro que lo sería! ¡Estaba segura! «Bien, pero ¿qué ocurrirá si lo piensa mejor y se aparta de nosotros? Nos hemos afanado mucho para que llegue a ser una actriz famosa, y si usted un día nos planta quedaremos en ridículo. ¿Qué habría que hacer entonces?» Ruzena se quedó un momento pensativa, y después dijo: «¡Buh!, el casino». «Eso no, Ruzena, nunca hay que volverse atrás cuando se ha estado más arriba. Debería ser algo mejor que el teatro.» Ruzena se echó a llorar: «Para nosotras no hay nada más. Joachim, él es mal amigo». Joachim dijo: «Bertrand está bromeando, Ruzena». Pero también él se sentía molesto y pensó que Bertrand había sobrepasado las fronteras del tacto. Bertrand, en cambio, se reía: «No hay razón para llorar; solo pensamos en cómo convertir a Ruzena en una persona rica y famosa. Entonces nos mantendrá a todos». Joachim quedó estupefacto; había que ver hasta qué punto la vida de los negocios embrutecía la delicadeza de un hombre.

Más tarde le dijo a Bertrand: «¿Por qué la tortura usted?». Bertrand contestó: «Hay que prevenir y únicamente se puede operar cuando uno está sano. Ahora todavía estamos a tiempo». Hablaba como un médico.

Sucedió lo que Joachim medio se temía. La carta fue a parar a manos del padre y por lo visto había vuelto a perder la cabeza, pues la madre escribió que había sufrido una recaída. Se sorprendió al ver cuán indiferente le dejaba este hecho. No se sintió obligado a ir a su casa, tiempo habría para ello. Helmuth le había encargado que acudiera en ayuda de su madre, pero ¡si apenas se la podía ayudar! La suerte que se había echado sobre los hombros debía soportarla ella sola. Le contestó que iría tan pronto como pudiera y se quedó, lo dejó todo como estaba, siguió prestando servicio y no adoptó ninguna disposición para cambiar nada y apartó de su mente cualquier idea al respecto con un temor inexplicable. Porque a veces tenía que hacer un esfuerzo para mantener en todo su aspecto habitual, y esto podía llegar a ser tan agudo que a menudo los hombres que se ocupaban de las cosas como si todo fuera realmente normal le parecían mezquinos, ciegos y casi idiotas. De momento no se le ocurrió, pero cuando tomó conciencia de nuevo del aspecto de circo que tenía el servicio militar, hizo a Bertrand responsable de ello. Ni siquiera el uniforme le caía como antes: de repente empezaron a molestarle las charreteras en los hombros, a molestarle los puños de la camisa, y una mañana, al mirarse al espejo, se preguntó por qué, en realidad, tenía que llevar el sable a la izquierda. En sus pensamientos se refugiaba en Ruzena, se decía que el amor hacia ella, el amor de ella por él, estaba fuera de todo convencionalismo equívoco. Cuando la miraba largamente a los ojos y acariciaba sus párpados con suavidad y ella lo aceptaba como amor, él se sumergía a menudo en un juego angustioso y ensombrecía este rostro hasta lo indeterminado, hasta el límite en que amenazaba con caer en lo inhumano y el rostro dejaba de ser un rostro. Muchas cosas eran como una melodía que uno cree no poder olvidar y de la que, sin embargo, se escapa, para volver a buscarla dolorosamente de nuevo. Era un juego terrible y desesperado y él hubiera querido, con decisión y enojo, poder hacer responsable a Bertrand de este estado de cosas. ¿Acaso no había hablado él mismo de su demonio interior? Ruzena notaba la irritación de Joachim, y la desconfianza que le inspiraba Bertrand desde aquella noche estalló un día, tras largo y sordo silencio, con evidente falta de tacto: «Tú no me quieres ya… ¿o debes preguntar amigo si puedes…? ¿o Bertrand lo ha prohibido ya?». Y aunque eran palabras malas y retadoras, Joachim las oyó con gusto, porque eran una especie de aliviadora confirmación de sus propias sospechas: que el origen demoníaco de toda desgracia radicaba en Bertrand. Incluso le pareció una última manifestación de este poder mefistofélico, funesto e hipócrita, que Ruzena, a pesar de la común aversión hacia Bertrand, en lugar de aproximarse más a Joachim, con estas manifestaciones rudas e incontroladas se acercara más a Bertrand

y a sus bromas no menos ofensivas: entre el amigo y la amante, ambos de poco fiar, entre estos dos civiles, se sentía apresado entre dos ruedas de molino de indelicadezas y molido sin piedad. Olía a malas compañías y a veces no sabía si Bertrand lo había llevado a Ruzena o si él había llegado a Bertrand a través de Ruzena, hasta que un día advirtió con espanto que ya no tenía ningún dominio sobre la masa evanescente y huidiza de la vida, que se sumergía cada vez más rápida y profundamente en locas quimeras, y que todo se había vuelto inseguro. Pero cuando pensó que debía buscar la salida de aquel caos en la religión, el abismo que lo separaba de los civiles se agrandó, pues al otro lado de este abismo estaba el civil Bertrand, un librepensador, estaba la católica Ruzena, y casi parecía que los dos se alegraran de su aislamiento.

Le gustó tener servicio en la iglesia el domingo. Pero incluso en la ceremonia militar lo perseguía lo civil. Porque los rostros de la tropa, que en dos columnas paralelas habían entrado marcialmente en la casa del Señor, no tenían diferente aspecto a los rostros que tomaban parte en los ejercicios y en las clases de equitación; ninguno de aquellos rostros estaba emocionado, ninguno reflejaba devoción. Tenían que ser obreros de la fábrica Borsig; auténticos hijos de campesinos de su tierra no hubieran estado allí tan indiferentes. Excepto los suboficiales, que guardaban una compostura piadosa y obligada, nadie escuchaba el sermón. La tentación de calificar todo esto con el nombre de circo estaba terriblemente cerca. Joachim cerró los ojos e intentó rezar, como había intentado rezar en la iglesia del pueblo. Tal vez tampoco rezó, pero cuando los soldados entonaron el coro, su voz se elevó con la de ellos, aun sin saberlo, pues con aquella canción que había cantado de niño surgió el recuerdo de una imagen, recuerdo de una pequeña imagen sacra de vivos colores, y, como el recuerdo era cada vez más claro, se acordó también de que se la había traído la cocinera polaca de pelo negro, oyó su ronca voz de campesina, y vio su dedo de yema agrietada señalar por encima de los colores indicando que ahí estaba la tierra, donde vivían los hombres, y más arriba, no mucho más arriba, sobre una nube de plata, estaba la Sagrada Familia, reunida en paz, con vestidos de vivos colores, y el oro que adornaba las túnicas competía con el brillo de la dorada aureola de los santos. Ahora no se atrevía a pensar en la beatitud con que había podido imaginar que él mismo formaba parte de la Sagrada Familia católica, que estaba sobre la nube plateada en brazos de la virginal Madre de Dios o en el regazo de la polaca de pelo negro… hoy no sabría definirlo con exactitud, pero sí sabía que el encanto estaba truncado por el temblor que ocasionaba tal insolencia sacrílega, la herejía cometida por un protestante de nacimiento al desear tal cosa y sentir tal beatitud, y el no haberse atrevido a dejarle un sitio en la estampa a su iracundo padre; pero no quería en modo alguno tenerlo allí. Y mientras él, cada vez con mayor concentración y esfuerzo de voluntad, intentaba representarse más de cerca la imagen, parecía como si la nube plateada se fuera alejando hacia lo alto, como si se empezara a esfumar en las alturas llevándose consigo a las figuras que en ella descansaban, las cuales parecían disolverse ligeramente, desvaneciéndose en la melodía del coro, un suave disolverse, que no suponía en absoluto una supresión del recuerdo, sino en cierto modo una iluminación y reforzamiento del mismo, de manera que él, por unos instantes, pudo pensar que así era como podía lograrse la solución evangélica de la sagrada imagen católica: el cabello de la Virgen ya no parecía oscuro, y ya no era la polaca, ni tampoco Ruzena, sino que los rizos se habían tornado más claros y dorados, y aquella blondez virginal hubiera podido ser la de Elisabeth. Todo aquello era un tanto extraño, pero resultaba liberador, un rayo de luz, un presentimiento de gracia en medio de la confusión. ¿No podía calificarse de gracia que una imagen católica se resolviera evangélicamente? Y en el fluir de las formas, un fluir tan suave como el caer del agua y de la niebla en una tarde lluviosa de primavera, comprendió que la temida disgregación del rostro humano en una nada de conmovedoras elevaciones y depresiones tenía que ser el primer peldaño de una nueva y resplandeciente unidad que formaba parte de una estructura beatífica y nubosa, que ya no era un calco del rostro terrenal, sino promesa de una imagen viva, gota cristalina que desciende cantando de las nubes. Y aunque esta faz más pura careciera de la belleza y de la confianza terrenales y fuera al principio extraña y pavorosa —más pavorosa tal vez que el desvanecerse de los rostros dentro del paisaje—, suponía sin embargo un primer paso, un presentimiento del espanto divino y al propio tiempo una certeza de la vida divina dentro de la cual transcurre lo terrenal, hundiéndose en el abismo como el rostro de Ruzena o el de Elisabeth o quizá incluso la figura de Bertrand. Por eso la imagen que surgía de nuevo no era en realidad la misma imagen infantil de antaño, con el padre y la madre: flotaba desde luego en el mismo lugar, flotaba sobre la misma nube plateada y él estaba sentado en idéntica postura al pie de la imagen, como lo estuviera entonces a los pies de la madre, convertido él mismo en un Niño Jesús, pero la imagen había madurado, ya no era un deseo de niño sino la certidumbre de una meta, y él sabía que había dado el primer paso, dolorosamente, hacia esta meta, admitido para la prueba, aunque estaba solo el comienzo de una serie de pruebas. Casi experimentó una sensación de orgullo. Pero entonces la imagen venturosa palideció, se secó como la lluvia que va extinguiéndose lentamente, y el hecho de que Elisabeth tuviera parte en ello fue como una última gota procedente del velo de brumas. Tal vez era una advertencia divina. Abrió los ojos; el coro terminaba y a Joachim le pareció que muchos jóvenes elevaban, como él, la mirada al cielo con un sentimiento íntimo de confianza y resolución.

Por la tarde encontró a Ruzena. Joachim dijo: «Bertrand tiene razón. El teatro no es lo más adecuado

para ti. ¿No te gustaría tener una tienda, vender cosas bonitas, como encajes o bordados?». Y vio ante sí una puerta acristalada, tras la que brillaba una lámpara familiar. Pero Ruzena lo miró en silencio, y sus ojos oscuros, como ocurría con frecuencia últimamente, se llenaron de lágrimas. «Sois hombres malos», balbuceó, y mantuvo cogida su mano.

Ante la nueva recaída, el médico pidió una consulta y Joachim no tuvo más remedio que ir a Stolpin con el neurólogo. Lo consideró como una parte de la penitencia que tenía que cumplir, idea que se afianzó cuando, durante el viaje, el médico le hizo diversas preguntas, con amable indiferencia, sobre aspectos de la enfermedad, sobre los antecedentes y sobre el ambiente familiar. A Joachim le parecían estas preguntas una inquisición, que, aunque suave, no dejaba de ser rigurosa y agobiante, y esperaba que el inquisidor, mirándole severamente a través de las gafas, levantara contra él un dedo acusador, y le parecía oír ya la temida y condenatoria palabra: asesino. Pero el anciano y amable caballero de gafas no parecía dispuesto a pronunciar la temida y sin embargo liberadora palabra, pues se limitó a opinar que probablemente la conmoción provocada por la muerte de su hijo había sido la causa de estas anomalías tan lamentables que sufría el señor Von Pasenow, si bien las raíces originarias podían ser más profundas. Joachim empezó a considerar al neurólogo con desconfianza, aunque también con cierto alivio, convencido de que un hombre con semejantes opiniones no podría ayudar al enfermo.

Después la conversación decayó y Joachim vio cómo cruzaban a su lado los campos y árboles tan conocidos. El especialista en enfermedades nerviosas se había adormecido con el traqueteo del viaje, el mentón entre las puntas del cuello almidonado, y la blanca barba cubriendo la abertura del chaleco. A Joachim le pareció inconcebible que él pudiera llegar a ser tan viejo, inconcebible también que aquel hombre hubiera sido joven alguna vez y que una mujer hubiera buscado un beso tras aquella barba; algo de aquello tendría que haber quedado patente, prendido en la barba como una pluma o una brizna de hierba. Se llevó la mano a la cara; era un engaño para Elisabeth que no hubiera quedado ni rastro de los besos con que Ruzena lo había despedido: Dios bendice al hombre al ocultarle el futuro, lo maldice al hacerle invisible el pasado; ¿no sería gracia divina que estigmatizara al hombre por todos sus actos? Pero Dios solo imprime el estigma en las conciencias, y esto no lo ve ni un neurólogo. Helmuth había recibido su estigma; por eso no se le podía ver dentro de su ataúd. Pero también el padre está marcado; uno que anduviera como andaba el padre tendría realmente que mirar de través.

El señor Von Pasenow se había levantado de la cama, pero se hallaba en un estado de absoluta apatía; no obstante, se le ocultó la presencia de Joachim por temor a nuevas explosiones de ira. Recibió al nuevo médico primero con indiferencia, pero enseguida lo tomó por un notario y exigió que se redactara de nuevo su testamento. Sí, Joachim, por su conducta deshonrosa, debía ser desheredado, pero él no era un padre duro, solo quería que Joachim le diera un nieto con Elisabeth. Este niño tenía que ser traído a la casa y convertirse en el heredero de todo. Tras un rato de reflexión añadió que Joachim no debía ver nunca al niño, pues, de hacerlo, también este sería desheredado. La madre le contó luego a Joachim todo esto con voz temblorosa y, contra su costumbre, se sumió en lamentaciones: ¿dónde irían a parar con todo aquello? Joachim se encogió de hombros; únicamente sintió de nuevo vergüenza al ver que alguien se atrevía a hablar de que él debía engendrar hijos con Elisabeth. También el neurólogo se encogió de hombros; no había que perder la esperanza, ya que el señor Von Pasenow tenía una naturaleza excepcionalmente fuerte, pero de momento solo cabía dar tiempo al tiempo. Y que no dejaran al enfermo demasiado en la cama, pues dada su avanzada edad podría ser contraproducente. La señora Von Pasenow replicó que su marido pedía siempre volver a la cama, que siempre tenía frío y que parecía estar torturado por un miedo interior que solo se apaciguaba algo en el dormitorio. Bien, había que atenerse al actual estado de ánimo del paciente, opinó el neurólogo, él únicamente podía decir que el señor Von Pasenow, tratado por su distinguido colega —este se inclinó agradecido—, se hallaba en las mejores manos.

Se había hecho tarde, había llegado el pastor y se sirvió la cena. De repente el señor Von Pasenow apareció en la puerta: «O sea que aquí se celebran reuniones sin comunicármelo; probablemente porque ya está aquí el nuevo dueño». Joachim se dispuso a salir de la habitación. «¡Quédate donde estás!», le gritó el señor Von Pasenow, y se sentó en el sillón destinado al padre de familia y que habían mantenido vacío, lo cual, evidentemente, lo serenó en parte. Ordenó que le sirvieran: «Aquí hay que restablecer el orden. Señor notario, ¿se han ocupado de usted? ¿Le han preguntado si bebe vino blanco o tinto? Solo veo tinto. ¿Y por qué no han servido champán? Un testamento hay que regarlo con champán». Rió socarronamente. Luego increpó a la criada: «¿Qué demonios pasa con el champán? ¿Tendré que ir yo mismo a ordeñar?». El neurólogo fue el primero en recobrarse y, para salvar la situación, dijo que le encantaría una copa de champán. El señor Von Pasenow miró triunfante a su alrededor: «Sí, hay que imponer otra vez el orden en esta casa. Nadie tiene sentido del honor…». Y en voz baja, dirigiéndose al médico: «Helmuth cayó por el honor. Pero no me escribe. Tal vez me guarda rencor…». Se quedó unos instantes pensativo, y después continuó:

—O este pastor me intercepta las cartas. Quiere guardar el secreto para sí. No quiere que alguno de los

nuestros llegue a saberlo. Pero al primer desorden que se produzca en el cementerio, este hombre de Dios saldrá por los aires. De eso respondo yo.

—Pero señor Von Pasenow, si allá reina el mejor orden del mundo.

—Solo en apariencia, señor notario, solo en apariencia; mero engaño de los ojos; no llegamos a sorprenderlos con facilidad, porque no entendemos su lenguaje; están evidentemente escondidos. Los demás oímos solo cuán mudos permanecen, pero ellos no cesan de elevar sus quejas. Por eso todos tienen miedo y cuando tengo un invitado he de llevarle yo mismo allí, yo, un viejo —y miró con encono a Joachim—. Naturalmente un hombre sin honor no tiene suficiente coraje, se esconde en el establo.

—Bien, señor Von Pasenow, precisamente tiene usted que velar por los intereses de la hacienda, inspeccionar los campos, sobre todo salir.

—Ya quisiera hacerlo, señor notario, y a veces lo hago. Pero cuando uno sale a la puerta, casi siempre están ahí, cerrando el paso; el aire está lleno de ellos, tan lleno que ni un sonido puede atravesarlo. —Se estremeció, cogió el vaso del médico y, antes de que nadie pudiera impedirlo, se lo bebió de un solo trago —. Tiene usted que venir a verme con frecuencia, señor notario, redactaremos testamentos. Y mientras, ¿me escribirá usted? ¿O usted también me decepcionará? —Le miró con desconfianza—: ¿Conspirará quizá con ellos…? Ese ya me engañó una vez con alguien… ese que está aquí.

Se había levantado de un salto y señalaba con el dedo a Joachim. Después cogió un plato y, como si apuntara, cerró un ojo. Pero el médico se levantó también y le puso una mano en el brazo: «Venga, señor Von Pasenow, vamos a charlar un rato en su habitación». El señor Von Pasenow le miraba sin comprender; el otro le sostuvo la mirada: «Venga conmigo, charlaremos un poco nosotros dos solos». «¿Realmente solos? Y yo ya no tendré miedo…» Ahora sonreía con aire de desamparo y tocó la mejilla del médico. «Eso es, demostrémosles que…» Hizo un gesto despectivo en dirección a la mesa y se dejó conducir fuera de la habitación.

Joachim había escondido la cara entre las manos. El padre lo había estigmatizado; por fin había ocurrido y, sin embargo, él se rebelaba. El pastor se le acercó y él oía de lejos banales palabras de consuelo: evidentemente el padre también tenía razón en este caso; este servidor de la iglesia cumplía mal su misión, debería saber que la maldición de un padre pesa imborrable sobre los hijos, debería saber que es la misma voz de Dios la que habla por boca de un padre y la que anuncia la prueba por la que uno debe pasar: ¡oh!, por eso el padre había caído en la locura, ya que nadie puede ser, impunemente, el portavoz de Dios. Realmente el pastor solo podía ser un hombre vulgar ya que, si fuera de verdad instrumento de Dios sobre la tierra, también tendría que hablar como un loco. Pero Dios ha indicado el camino que lleva a la gracia sin mediación de ningún clérigo; uno no podía rebelarse contra esto; uno debía obtener la gracia por sí solo y en el propio dolor. Joachim dijo: «Le agradezco sus buenas palabras, señor pastor; ahora necesitaremos con frecuencia que usted nos proporcione su consuelo». Entonces volvieron los médicos; el señor Von Pasenow dormitaba bajo los efectos de una inyección.

El neurólogo permaneció todavía dos días en la hacienda. Y como al poco tiempo llegó un telegrama muy alarmante de Bertrand desde Berlín y el estado del enfermo seguía estacionario, también Joachim pudo partir.

Bertrand había vuelto a Berlín. Por la tarde fue a visitar a Joachim, pero solo encontró a Ruzena. Estaba arreglando el dormitorio y, cuando Bertrand entró, le dijo:

—Yo no hablo con usted.

—Vaya, Ruzena, ¡qué amabilidad!

—Yo no hablo con usted. Ya sé qué puedo esperar de usted.

—¿Soy otra vez «mal amigo», mi pequeña Ruzena?

—No soy su pequeña Ruzena.

—Veamos, ¿qué ha ocurrido?

—¿Ocurrido? Sé todo. Usted lo ha enviado lejos. Su tienda de usted, tienda de puntillas, me da asco.

—Bueno, admitamos que tengo una tienda de puntillas, ¿por qué no? Pero eso no significa que no se pueda hablar conmigo. ¿Qué pasa, pues, con mi tienda de puntillas?

Ruzena iba colocando en silencio la ropa en la cómoda; Bertrand acercó una silla y se alegró por lo que iba a seguir.

—Si ser mi casa, me gustaría echarle, no dejar sentarse.

—Pero Ruzena, ahora en serio, ¿qué ocurre? ¿Está otra vez tan mal el viejo señor, que Pasenow ha tenido que marcharse?

—No fingir que no lo sabe; no soy tan tonta.

—Yo no creo que lo seas, pequeña Ruzena.

Ella no se volvió y continuó ordenando la ropa:

—No dejo que se burlen de mí… no dejo que nadie se burle de mí.

Bertrand se acercó a ella y tomó su cabeza entre las manos para mirarla a los ojos. Ella se desasió:

—No tocarme. Primero lo aparta de mí, luego se burla.

Bertrand comprendió lo que sucedía, excepto lo de la tienda de puntillas:

—Veamos, Ruzena, ¿usted no cree que el viejo señor Von Pasenow está enfermo?

Nada creo yo; todos están contra mí.

Bertrand se irritó un poco:

—Probablemente el viejo señor se va a morir solo porque está en contra de la pequeña Ruzena.

—Cuando usted lo mate, morirá.

Bertrand hubiera querido ayudarla, pero resultaba difícil; sabía que ante este estado de ánimo poco se podía hacer y se dispuso a marcharse.

—A usted hay que matar —concluyó Ruzena.

—Muy bien —repuso Bertrand divertido—, no tengo ningún inconveniente, pero ¿mejorará eso las cosas?

—O sea que no tiene ningún inconveniente, ningún inconveniente… —Ruzena removía alterada el cajón de la cómoda—, … pero seguirá burlándose de mí, ¿verdad?

Siguió buscando entre la ropa, mientras murmuraba «ningún inconveniente», y por fin halló lo que buscaba. Hostil, con el revólver de Joachim en la mano, se enfrentó a Bertrand. Esto es absurdo, pensó Bertrand:

—Ruzena, deja eso.

—Usted no tiene ningún inconveniente…

Un asomo de ira y también de vergüenza impedía a Bertrand salir sencillamente del cuarto; quiso acercarse a Ruzena para quitarle al arma, pero sonó un disparo, luego otro, y el revólver, que Ruzena había dejado caer, chocó contra el suelo. «Realmente, es demasiado tonto», dijo Bertrand inclinándose para recogerlo. El ordenanza había entrado corriendo, pero Bertrand le aclaró que el revólver había caído y se había disparado solo. «Diga al señor teniente que no debe guardar las armas cargadas.» El ordenanza se fue. «Bien, Ruzena, ¿eres o no una chiquilla tonta?» Ruzena, blanca como el papel y medio petrificada, señaló hacia Bertrand y dijo: «allí»; de la manga de Bertrand caían gotas de sangre. «Hágame arrestar», tartamudeó Ruzena. Bertrand se arrancó la chaqueta y la camisa; no había sentido nada; la bala solo le había rozado el brazo, pero tenía que verle un médico. Llamó al ordenanza para que enviara a buscar una calesa. Se hizo un vendaje de emergencia con un trozo de camisa de Joachim y pidió a Ruzena que limpiara las manchas de sangre; pero ella estaba tan nerviosa y confusa que él tuvo que ayudarla. «Bueno, Ruzena, y ahora te vienes conmigo; no quiero dejarte sola ahora. Nadie te arrestará, si reconoces que eres una chiquilla tonta.» Ruzena le siguió maquinalmente. Ya ante la casa del médico, él le pidió que le esperara en el coche. Explicó al médico que había recibido un balazo en el brazo en un desdichado y casual accidente. «Pues ha tenido suerte. De todos modos, no lo tome a la ligera; es mejor que pase un par de días en la clínica.» A Bertrand le pareció una exageración, pero, al bajar la escalera, se sintió realmente mal. Ante su profunda sorpresa, Ruzena ya no estaba en el coche. Muy descortés por su parte, pensó. Primero fue a su casa a recoger cuanto un hombre práctico y concienzudo puede necesitar en un lecho de enfermo y, una vez instalado en la clínica, envió una nota a Ruzena rogándole que fuera a verle. El mensajero volvió diciendo que la señorita aún no había regresado a su casa. Era extraño y casi alarmante, pero no se hallaba en condiciones de intentar nada aquel día. A la mañana siguiente envió otra vez a preguntar por ella: no había vuelto a casa ni tampoco había sido vista en el apartamento de Joachim. Entonces decidió telegrafiar a Stolpin, y al cabo de dos días llegó Joachim.

Bertrand no se sintió obligado a relatarle a Joachim con absoluta fidelidad lo que había sucedido; la historia del accidente y de la torpeza de Ruzena era bastante plausible. Y concluyó: «Desde entonces no se ha dejado ver. Puede no significar nada, pero una muchacha tan excitada es capaz de cometer cualquier tontería». Joachim pensó: ¿Qué habrá hecho con ella? Después recordó repentinamente con espanto que Ruzena, unas veces en broma, pero otras en serio, había amenazado a menudo con echarse al agua. Vio los sauces grises de las riberas del Havel, el árbol bajo el cual se habían refugiado en aquella ocasión. Sí, debía yacer en aquella zona del río. Por un instante esta idea romántica le fascinó. Pero enseguida le embargó de nuevo el espanto. ¡Destino inevitable, prueba inevitable! Antes de partir había orado aún en la iglesia, lleno de esperanza, pidiendo que la enfermedad del padre no significara una penitencia impuesta al hijo, sino simplemente un azar de la vida, pero he aquí que Dios le mostraba que aquel simple pensamiento era ya pecaminoso: no se puede dudar de las pruebas enviadas por Dios, el azar no existe. Bertrand podía haberse separado del padre en aparente desacuerdo y reducir ahora a una absurda casualidad el incidente del revólver, pero todo ello solo para disimular que era el enviado del mal, el escogido por Dios y por el padre para preparar la penitencia al pecador, para empujarlo a la tentación, para llevarlo a una trampa y que el

tentado admitiera, perplejo, que él era tan perverso como el tentador y que asimismo estaba condenado, desde siempre, a ser el funesto instrumento del destino de su prójimo, y que nunca lograría arrancar la presa de las manos del tentador. Y si uno ha reconocido todo esto, ¿no sería mejor que se anulara a sí mismo? ¿No hubiera sido mucho mejor que la bala le hubiese alcanzado a él y no a Helmuth? Pero ahora era demasiado tarde, ahora Ruzena yacía en el fondo del Havel, miraba con ojos vidriosos los peces que se deslizaban sobre ella en el agua gris. Sin ninguna transición la imagen de ella se confundió otra vez con la del italiano de la ópera, pero también esto se esfumó y Joachim descubrió que el hombre que yacía en el agua era él mismo. Sí, en sus propios ojos azules se veía la mirada nefasta del mal, ese mal en que creen los italianos, y constituía un simple acto de justicia que sobre aquellos ojos nadaran los peces. Bertrand dijo: «¿Tiene usted alguna idea? Esperemos que sencillamente haya regresado a su hogar. ¿Tenía dinero suficiente?». A Joachim le ofendió la pregunta; encerraba la indiferencia inquisitorial de un médico. ¿Qué pensaba otra vez de él ese Bertrand? Claro que Ruzena tenía dinero. Bertrand no se dio cuenta de su irritación: «No obstante, debemos comunicarlo a la policía. No está descartado que la chica ande vagando por ahí». Lógicamente había que comunicarlo a la policía, Bertrand tenía razón, pero a Joachim le asustaba todo aquello; le harían preguntas sobre sus relaciones con Ruzena y, aunque se decía a sí mismo que eso carecía de importancia, temía sin embargo misteriosas e insospechadas consecuencias. Tal vez Dios quería conocer a través de la policía sus relaciones con Ruzena, tanto tiempo culpablemente ocultas, quizá esto formaba parte de la serie de pruebas y lo agravaba el hecho de que el edificio de la policía estuviera en la Alexanderplatz, que, ahora más que nunca, él no quería pisar. Sin embargo se levantó:

—Voy a la policía.

—No, Pasenow, yo lo haré por usted. Usted está todavía demasiado excitado, y además estos señores sospechan enseguida toda clase de dramas.

Joachim se lo agradeció muy sinceramente:

—Sí; pero su brazo…

—Bah, no tiene importancia, me dejarán salir enseguida.

—Yo le acompañaré.

—Muy bien. Espero que usted, al menos, esté todavía esperándome en el coche cuando yo salga.

Bertrand había recuperado su optimismo y Joachim se sintió más seguro. En el coche indicó a Bertrand que pidiera a la policía que inspeccionaran las orillas del Havel. «Así lo haré, Pasenow, pero creo que Ruzena está en Bohemia desde hace tiempo. Lástima que no sepa usted el nombre de su nido, pero ya lo averiguaremos.» El propio Joachim se sorprendió de no conocer el lugar donde Ruzena había nacido, apenas si sabía su apellido. A menudo ella le había hecho pronunciar aquel apellido en broma, pero él lo lograba con dificultad y no podía retener aquellas palabras extranjeras. Ahora se daba cuenta de que, en realidad, nunca lo había querido saber ni recordar, como si casi hubiera tenido un poco de miedo a aquel nombre inofensivo.

Acompañó a Bertrand por los pasillos de la comisaría. Tuvo que esperarle ante la puerta de una oficina. Bertrand regresó muy pronto: «Ya lo sabemos». Y le mostró un papel con el nombre checo del lugar. «¿Les habló usted de las orillas del Havel?» Sí, Bertrand se lo había dicho: «Pero usted, querido Pasenow, tiene esta noche una desagradable misión que cumplir y de la que yo, desgraciadamente, no me puedo hacer cargo por culpa de mi brazo. Se vestirá de civil y dará una vuelta por los locales nocturnos. No he querido poner a la policía sobre esta pista, ya tendremos tiempo. Corríamos el peligro de que al final arrestaran a la pobre Ruzena en cualquier cafetucho». Joachim no había pensado en esta vulgarísima y vergonzosa posibilidad; ese Bertrand era realmente un cínico repugnante. Miró a Bertrand: ¿sabía él algo más? Solo Mefistófeles sabía por qué Margarita debía ofrecer una expiación. Pero Bertrand era impenetrable. No había otra salida que someterse y cumplir la orden de Bertrand como una prueba.

Había empezado el vergonzoso recorrido, había preguntado a los camareros y muchachas de los mostradores, y se sintió aliviado al averiguar que Ruzena no había sido vista en el Jágerkasino. Pero en la escalera se encontró con una de las gordas animadoras: «¿Buscas a tu novia, pequeño? ¿Te ha plantado? Anda, ven conmigo, encontrarás otra enseguida». ¿Qué sabía esa mujer de su relación con Ruzena? Era muy posible que hubiera encontrado a Ruzena, pero le repugnó preguntárselo, pasó deprisa por su lado y se dirigió a otro local. Sí, había estado allí, dijo la encargada del guardarropa, ayer o anteayer, no sabía más, tal vez podría informarle la mujer de los lavabos. Tuvo que continuar su calvario, tuvo que seguir preguntando, cada vez con mayor vergüenza, en los guardarropas, en los lavabos, y averiguar si la habían visto o no, que se había lavado, que una vez se había ido con un caballero y que tenía un aspecto muy deprimido: «Todos le dijimos, con la mejor intención, que debía irse a casa; una muchacha en tal estado desprestigia un local, pero ella se quedó sentada ahí sin decir palabra». Muchas de aquellas personas le llamaban espontáneamente «señor teniente», lo cual le hizo sospechar que Ruzena hubiera traicionado su amor confiándolo a esas gentes, y sobre todo a las mujeres de los lavabos, adonde siempre lo encaminaban.

Allí la encontró. Estaba sentada, soñolienta, en un rincón del tocador, bajo una lámpara de gas; su mano, con el anillo regalado por él, descansaba alicaída sobre el mármol del lavabo. Se había desabrochado los botines, y la parte abierta, forrada de tela gris, colgaba informe sobre el pie, que asomaba por el borde inferior del vestido. El sombrero se había corrido un poco hacia atrás, y los largos alfileres habían arrastrado tras sí el peinado. Joachim hubiera querido marcharse; daba la impresión de estar borracha. Él le tocó la mano; Ruzena abrió los ojos con dificultad; al reconocerle, los cerró de nuevo. «Ruzena, tenemos que irnos.» Con los ojos cerrados, ella sacudió la cabeza. Él permaneció a su lado sin saber qué hacer. «¿Por qué no le da un beso cariñoso?», le animó la encargada de los lavabos. «No», gritó angustiosamente Ruzena, se levantó de un salto y trató de alcanzar la puerta. Tropezó con los botines desabrochados, y Joachim la sostuvo. «Señorita, con estos zapatos y este peinado no puede salir a la calle», rogó la mujer de los lavabos, «el señor teniente no quiere hacerle daño.» «Suélteme, déjenme salir», decía Ruzena con dientes apretados, y entonces escupió a Joachim: «Ha terminado, tú lo sabes, ha terminado». Su aliento olía a trasnochado y a podrido. Pero Joachim no la dejó pasar, entonces Ruzena dio la vuelta, se metió en un excusado y echó el cerrojo. «Ha terminado», rugía desde dentro, «dígale se vaya; ha terminado.» Joachim se dejó caer en la silla del rincón; incapaz de pensar, solo sabía que aquella era una de las pruebas enviadas por Dios: su mirada quedó fija en el cajón medio abierto de la mesa donde la mujer de los lavabos guardaba sus chismes: toallas, un sacacorchos, un cepillo de ropa, todo revuelto. «¿Se ha ido ya?», se oyó de nuevo la voz de Ruzena. «Ruzena, sal», le rogó él. «Señorita, salga usted», rogó la mujer, «es el lavabo de señoras y el señor teniente no puede quedarse aquí.» «Tiene que marcharse», fue la respuesta de Ruzena. «Ruzena, por favor, sal», imploró de nuevo Joachim, pero Ruzena permaneció muda detrás de la puerta cerrada. La mujer de los lavabos tiró a Joachim de la manga hasta el vestíbulo y le susurró: «Ella saldría, si no oyera al señor teniente. El señor teniente puede esperarla abajo». Joachim obedeció a la mujer y esperó algo más de una hora a la sombra de la casa contigua. Entonces apareció Ruzena; a su lado anadeaba un hombre rechoncho, barbudo, blando. Ella miró cautamente, con una sonrisa extraña, rígida y maligna, a su alrededor, y entonces el hombre llamó un coche y se alejaron de allí. Joachim tuvo que contener las náuseas; se arrastró hasta su casa sin saber cómo había podido llegar, y quizá lo que más le torturaba era no poder apartar de sí la idea de que el hombre gordo era en realidad digno de conmiseración, porque Ruzena no se había lavado y olía a malas noches. El revólver estaba aún sobre la cómoda; lo inspeccionó: faltaban dos balas. Con el arma aprisionada entre las manos, empezó a orar: «Dios mío, acógeme como acogiste a mi hermano; con él fuiste clemente, sé también clemente conmigo». Pero entonces recordó que aún no había redactado sus últimas voluntades; y Ruzena no podía quedar desamparada, de lo contrario ella tendría razón en todo lo que le había hecho, por muy incomprensible que fuera. Buscó papel y tinta. El alba le sorprendió dormido sobre una hoja apenas comenzada.

Ocultó a Bertrand lo sucedido con Ruzena; sentía vergüenza ante él, no quería concederle un triunfo y, aunque detestaba la mentira, le contó que la había encontrado en su casa.

—Estupendo —dijo Bertrand—. ¿Lo ha comunicado usted a la policía? Podrían crearle todavía dificultades.

Naturalmente Joachim no había pensado en ello y Bertrand envió una nota a la policía.

—¿Y dónde estuvo metida estos tres días?

—No lo quiere decir.

—Bueno.

Esta indiferencia y esta objetividad resultaban irritantes; él casi se había pegado un tiro y el otro se limitaba a decir «bueno». Pero él no se había pegado un tiro, porque tenía que cuidar de Ruzena, y para hacerlo necesitaba el consejo de Bertrand:

—Escuche, Bertrand, ahora tendré que hacerme cargo de la hacienda. Primero pensé comprarle a Ruzena, que necesita estar ocupada y ganarse la vida, una tienda o algo parecido…

—¡Ajá! —le interrumpió Bertrand.

—Pero no va a ser posible. Por eso quisiera darle una suma de dinero. ¿Cómo se hace esto?

—Se le asigna una cantidad. Pero sería mejor fijarle una renta por un tiempo determinado; de otro modo, se gastará el dinero enseguida.

—Bien, pero ¿cómo se hace?

—Yo lo haría por usted con mucho gusto, pero es mejor que se lo encarguemos a mi abogado. Fijaré una cita con él para mañana o pasado mañana. Hablando de otra cosa, tiene usted un aspecto pésimo, amigo mío.

Joachim opinó que aquello carecía de importancia.

—Pero ¿qué es lo que le afecta tanto? No debe tomárselo tan a pecho —dijo Bertrand con leve afabilidad.

Su mordaz indiscreción y este gesto irónico de los labios son odiosos, pensó Joachim, y desde muy lejos

le vino de nuevo la sospecha de que tras la inexplicable conducta de Ruzena y su falta de formalidad se ocultaban las intrigas de Bertrand, alguna relación ruin que hubiera arrastrado a Ruzena a la locura. Era una pequeña satisfacción que Ruzena, en cierto modo, traicionara también a Bertrand con el hombre gordo. Reaparecieron las náuseas de la noche anterior. ¡En qué abismo de inmundicia había caído! Fuera la lluvia otoñal corría por los cristales. Ahora los edificios contiguos a la fábrica Borsig estarían negros de hollín, negro el pavimento, y el patio de la fábrica, que se veía a través del portón, un mar de lodo negro y reluciente. Aspiró el humo que la lluvia hacía bajar desde el extremo ennegrecido de la larga chimenea roja: olía a podrido, a trasnochado, a sulfuro. Este era el abismo de inmundicia, a él pertenecían el gordo y Ruzena y Bertrand; todo era muy parecido a los locales nocturnos, con sus luces de gas y sus lavabos. El día se había transformado en noche y la noche en día. Se le ocurrió la expresión «albas de la noche», aunque poca cosa le sugería. ¿Existían también albas de luz? Oyó la expresión «luminosa figura virginal». Exacto, eso era lo contrario de albas de la noche. Y vio de nuevo a Elisabeth, distinta a todos los demás, allá en lo alto, en la nube de plata, flotando sobre todos los abismos de inmundicia. Tal vez él ya había presentido todo esto cuando vio las blancas nubes de encajes en el dormitorio de Elisabeth y deseó velar su sueño. Ahora ella llegaría pronto con su madre para ocupar la nueva casa. No dejaba de ser curioso que también allí hubiera lavabos; le pareció un sacrilegio pensarlo. Pero no era menos sacrílego que Bertrand yaciera aquí, con su pelo rubio y ondulado, en una habitación blanca, como si fuera una muchacha. Así ocultan las tinieblas su verdadero ser, sin dejar entrever su secreto. Pero Bertrand, con amistosa preocupación, prosiguió: «Tiene usted tan mal aspecto, Pasenow, que debería tomarse unas vacaciones. Le sentaría bien viajar, pensaría en otras cosas». Me quiere alejar de aquí, pensó Joachim; lo ha conseguido con Ruzena y ahora también quiere llevar a Elisabeth a la perdición. «No», dijo, «ahora no puedo marcharme…» Bertrand permaneció un rato en silencio y después, como si hubiera presentido las sospechas de Joachim y se viera obligado a revelar sus malas intenciones respecto a Elisabeth, preguntó: «¿Están ya en Berlín las señoras Baddensen?». Bertrand seguía sonriendo abiertamente, con una sonrisa casi luminosa, pero Joachim, con una brusquedad que no era propia en él, contestó secamente: «Las señoras prolongarán seguramente unos días su estancia en Lestow». Y ahora sabía que debía seguir viviendo, que este era su deber de caballero, a fin de que otro destino no se perdiera por su culpa y cayera en las garras de Bertrand. Pero Bertrand se despidió de él diciéndole en tono cordial: «Así pues pondré a mi abogado en antecedentes… Y cuando esté solucionado lo de Ruzena, márchese usted de vacaciones. Lo necesita de verdad». Joachim no replicó; su decisión era firme, y se alejó ensimismado en lúgubres pensamientos. Siempre era Bertrand quien los provocaba. Y en el gesto, en cierta manera militar, con que echó su cuerpo hacia atrás para liberarse de estos pensamientos, le pareció de repente como si Helmuth le cogiera de nuevo de la mano, como si Helmuth quisiera mostrarle otra vez el camino, devolverlo nuevamente a los convencionalismos y la puntualidad, abrirle una vez más los ojos. El hecho de que Bertrand, a quien la salida hasta la comisaría probablemente había sentado mal, tuviera un nuevo acceso de fiebre, pasó inadvertido a Joachim.

Las noticias del estado de salud de su padre eran invariablemente pesimistas. Ya no conocía a nadie, se limitaba a vegetar. Joachim sorprendió en sí mismo la idea odiosa, pero agradable, de que ahora se podía enviar a Stolpin, sin ningún peligro, cualquier tipo de carta. Imaginaba al mensajero entrando en el cuarto con la cartera y al viejo dejando caer una carta tras otra sin comprender nada, sin darse siquiera cuenta de que entre las cartas había una participación de matrimonio. Y esto era una especie de liberación y una vaga esperanza para el futuro.

La posibilidad de volver a ver a Ruzena le daba miedo, aunque a veces, al volver del servicio, le parecía inaudito no encontrarla en su apartamento. Por otra parte esperaba, todos los días, tener noticias de Ruzena, ya que había arreglado el asunto de la renta con el abogado de Bertrand y suponía que se lo habrían notificado a Ruzena. En vez de esto llegó un escrito del abogado, comunicándole que la donación no había sido aceptada. Esto no podía ser. Se dirigió a casa de Ruzena: el edificio, la escalera, la vivienda, le encogieron el corazón, sintió una nostalgia casi angustiosa. Temió hallarse de nuevo ante una puerta cerrada, o ser echado tal vez por alguna mujer de la limpieza, y, aunque le repugnaba entrar así en la habitación de una dama, preguntó sencillamente si estaba en casa, llamó y entró. Tanto la habitación como la propia Ruzena se hallaban en un estado de desorden y confusión, tenían un aspecto salvaje y desolado. Ella estaba echada en el sofá, e hizo un gesto ausente y cansado, como si supiera que él iba a venir. Con voz lánguida dijo: «No cojo nada regalado de ti. Anillo me lo quedo. Un recuerdo». Joachim fue incapaz de sentir compasión. En la escalera tenía todavía la intención de aclararle que, en el fondo, no entendía lo que ella le reprochaba, pero ahora estaba simplemente exasperado. No veía en todo aquello más que obstinación. Sin embargo, dijo: «Ruzena, no sé realmente lo que ha pasado…». Ella rió con sarcasmo, y él se sintió de nuevo profundamente exasperado ante aquella obstinación y mala fe que tanto daño le habían hecho y que eran injustas. No, era inútil intentar convencerla, y le dijo simplemente que no podía soportar la idea de no saber el futuro de ella medio asegurado y que él ya lo habría hecho mucho tiempo atrás, tanto si hubieran permanecido juntos como si no, y que además ahora le resultaba más fácil porque él —lo dijo

con toda intención— debía hacerse cargo de la hacienda y por tanto se defendería mucho mejor económicamente. «Eres hombre bueno», dijo Ruzena, «solo tienes mal amigo.» En definitiva, esta era también la opinión de Joachim, pero como íntimamente no quería reconocerlo, se limitó a preguntar: «¿Por qué es Bertrand un mal amigo?». Y Ruzena replicó: «Sobran palabras». Era muy tentador formar un frente común con Ruzena en contra de Bertrand, mas ¿no sería eso también una tentación del diablo o una intriga de Bertrand? Ruzena pareció darse cuenta de sus pensamientos, porque dijo: «Debes guardarte de él». Joachim respondió: «Conozco sus defectos». Ella se había incorporado y los dos estaban sentados en el sofá. «Eres un buen muchacho. No sabes qué hombre malo puede ser él.» Joachim le aseguró que lo sabía perfectamente y que a él no se le engañaba con tanta facilidad. Y así estuvieron un buen rato hablando de Bertrand, sin pronunciar su nombre, y, como no querían dejar de hablar, no se apartaron del tema, hasta que la insípida tristeza que emanaba de sus palabras fue creciendo más y más, se mezcló con sus palabras y con las lágrimas de Ruzena, y llegó a formar una corriente que se tornaba cada vez más ancha y más lenta. También Joachim tenía lágrimas en los ojos. Entregados sin amparo al desatino de la existencia, se dieron cuenta de que ya no podían prestarse ninguna ayuda el uno al otro. No se atrevían a mirarse. Finalmente, Joachim, con voz apesadumbrada y ronca, dijo: «Te lo ruego, Ruzena, acepta al menos el dinero». Ella no respondió, pero le cogió la mano. Cuando él se inclinó para besarla, ella bajó la cabeza y los labios de él solo encontraron las horquillas de su peinado. «Vete ahora», dijo Ruzena, «vete enseguida.» Y Joachim salió sin hacer ruido de la habitación, donde empezaba ya a reinar la oscuridad.

Se puso en contacto con el abogado para que renovase el documento de donación; esta vez Ruzena lo aceptaría. Pero la ternura con que él y Ruzena se habían despedido lo turbaba más que la triste exasperación en que le había sumido el incomprensible comportamiento de la muchacha. Y seguía siendo incomprensible y espantoso. Al pensar en Ruzena sentía aquella apagada nostalgia, aquella involuntaria añoranza que había sentido por su casa y por su madre en los primeros tiempos de la academia militar. ¿Estaría el hombre gordo ahora con ella? Se acordó sin querer de las bromas con que el padre había abrumado a Ruzena y también en esto vio la maldición del padre, quien, pese a estar enfermo y también él desamparado, había enviado sin embargo un representante. Sí, Dios era el ejecutor de la maldición del padre, y no había otra salida que inclinarse.

De vez en cuando hacía un débil intento de encontrarse con Ruzena, pero cuando se hallaba a un par de manzanas de su casa, retrocedía o doblaba por cualquier calle, y llegaba al barrio obrero o al torbellino de la Alexanderplatz, una vez llegó incluso a la estación Küstrin. La red se había vuelto inextricable, se le escapaban todos los hilos. Su único consuelo era que estaba a punto de solucionarse el asunto de la renta, y Joachim pasaba horas enteras en casa del abogado de Bertrand, más tiempo, en realidad, del estrictamente necesario. Pero las horas que pasaba allí significaban para él una especie de bálsamo. Y aunque estas visitas interminables y vacías pudieran no ser muy del agrado del abogado, y aunque Joachim no averiguó lo que esperaba saber del representante de Bertrand, el abogado no rehuía las preguntas —que aludían solo a medias al asunto y a veces eran casi de carácter privado— de su distinguido cliente y le dedicaba aquella solicitud profesional que recordaba por cierto a la de un médico y que no obstante le hacía bien a Joachim. El abogado, un hombre lacónico y sin barba, a pesar de ser el representante de Bertrand, parecía inglés.

Cuando por fin, con mucho retraso, llegó la aceptación de Ruzena, el abogado dijo:

—Bueno, lo hemos conseguido. Pero si de mí dependiera, señor Von Pasenow, le aconsejaría dejar a la libre elección de la dama el percibir, en lugar de la renta, el capital correspondiente.

—Pero —objetó Joachim— yo acordé con el señor Von Bertrand lo de la renta, porque…

—Conozco sus razones, señor Von Pasenow, y también sé, le ruego disculpe la expresión, que a usted no le gusta agarrar al toro por los cuernos, pero lo que le propongo es en interés de ambas partes: para la señora es una hermosa suma que, llegado el caso, puede ofrecerle una base más sólida para organizar su vida que la renta, y para usted significa una solución definitiva.

Joachim se sintió un tanto perplejo: ¿quería él una solución definitiva? El abogado se dio cuenta de su perplejidad: «Si me permite aludir a la parte privada de la cuestión, mi experiencia me ha enseñado que siempre es mejor una solución que permite considerar una relación pasada como inexistente». Joachim le miró con asombro. «Sí, inexistente, señor Von Pasenow. El convencionalismo es siempre, a pesar de todo, el mejor consejero.» La palabra «inexistente» quedó flotando en el aire. Era extraño que Bertrand modificara su propia opinión por boca de su representante y que llegara a admitir incluso el convencionalismo de los sentimientos. ¿Por qué lo hacía? El abogado añadió: «Considere usted la cuestión en este sentido, señor Von Pasenow. Además, dada su posición, carece de importancia la entrega de esta suma». Sí, en su posición; el sentimiento, cálido y tranquilizador, de su hogar natal, le embargó de nuevo. Esta vez salió del despacho del abogado con una íntima sensación de bienestar, casi podría decirse que animado y fortalecido. Ciertamente no veía aún con absoluta claridad el camino a seguir, porque todavía lo confundía la red de lo invisible que parecía haberse tendido sobre la ciudad, de todo lo invisible que no se podía abarcar y que hacía perder contenido a la añoranza sorda y todavía no perdida de Ruzena, y la llenaba al mismo tiempo

de un nuevo y angustioso contenido, lo unía a él con Ruzena y el mundo de la ciudad de una manera tan nueva e irreal que la red de la falsa claridad se transformó en una red de angustia cuya maraña amenazaba con apresar también a Elisabeth cuando regresara al mundo de la ciudad, que no es el suyo, Elisabeth, la inocente e intacta, apresada y ligada en lo demoníaco e inconcebible, apresada y ligada por su culpa, arrastrada por él, que era incapaz de liberarse del invisible cerco del mal: la confusa unión entre la claridad y la oscuridad seguía amenazando una y otra vez, aunque invisible y a lo lejos, aunque indeterminada y sin trabas, pero tan sucia como el comportamiento de su padre con las criadas en casa de la madre. A pesar de todo, Joachim sintió el cambio en cuanto salió del despacho del abogado, pues era como si Bertrand se hubiera desmentido por boca de su propio representante: era Bertrand quien había querido arrastrarle hasta la red de lo invisible y de lo inabarcable, y ahora su representante había tenido que admitir que la posición de un Pasenow era muy distinta, lejos de esta ciudad y de su torbellino, si se quería considerar todas estas fantasmagorías como inexistentes. Sí, Bertrand se lo había dicho a través de su representante y lo maligno se neutraliza por fin a sí mismo, lo maligno se somete a la voluntad de Dios, el cual exige, por boca del padre, el aniquilamiento y la no-existencia de lo que el propio padre ha maldecido. El maligno se entrega vencido, y, si bien no renuncia abiertamente a Elisabeth, le indica a él mismo que debe acatar las órdenes del padre. Y Joachim, sin molestarse en pedir consejo a Bertrand, decidió dar plena autorización al abogado para que entregara aquella cantidad.

Y también sin consultar a Bertrand, en cuanto tuvo noticia de la llegada de la familia del barón, se puso el uniforme de gala y los guantes nuevos y fue a visitar a los Baddensen a una hora en que esperaba encontrar en casa al barón y a la baronesa. Quisieron enseñarle enseguida la nueva mansión, pero Joachim pidió al barón sostener primero con él una conversación en privado, y, en cuanto los dos se retiraron para hablar, Joachim enderezó su porte con una leve sacudida reglamentaria, se mantuvo erguido como ante un superior y pidió la mano de Elisabeth. El barón dijo: «Me alegra mucho, me siento muy honrado, mi querido, querido Pasenow», y llamó a la baronesa. La baronesa dijo: «Oh, lo esperaba, una madre ve muchas cosas», y se secó delicadamente los ojos. Sí, él constituía para ellos el hijo deseado, no podían pensar en otro mejor y estaban convencidos de que haría cuanto estuviera en su mano para hacer feliz a su hija. Sí, así lo haría, contestó Joachim en tono varonil. El barón le había cogido la mano, pero ahora, ante todo, debían hablar con su hija; era muy comprensible, ¿no? Joachim respondió que lo comprendía perfectamente, y mantuvieron todavía los tres durante un cuarto de hora una conversación semiformal, semifamiliar, en cuyo curso Joachim no pudo abstenerse de mencionar la herida de Bertrand. Después se despidió con brevedad, sin haber visto ni la nueva casa ni a Elisabeth, pero ahora esto carecía de importancia, ya que disponía de toda una vida para hacerlo.

Le sorprendía no estar esperando con más ansia el «sí» de ella y también el que nada le impulsara a acortar el plazo de la espera, y a veces le extrañaba ser incapaz de imaginarse su vida futura: se veía a sí mismo, es cierto, apoyado en un bastón de puño de marfil en medio del patio de la hacienda, con Elisabeth a su lado, pero al intentar enfocar esta imagen se interponía la de Bertrand. No resultaría nada fácil comunicarle que se había prometido; en definitiva, esto iba precisamente en contra de Bertrand y de él tenía que ser preservada Elisabeth, y, mirándolo bien, tenía un poco la apariencia de una traición, puesto que él en cierta ocasión le había cedido en cierto modo a Elisabeth. Y, aunque Bertrand no merecía otro trato, era, sin embargo, bastante embarazoso causarle este daño. Como es lógico, esto no era una razón para aplazar los esponsales, pero le pareció de repente que estos esponsales no podían tener lugar si antes no se informaba a Bertrand. Todavía estaba obligado a no perder de vista a Bertrand, y Joachim no comprendía cómo había podido olvidarle durante tantos días, como si estuviera ya libre de toda obligación. Además, Bertrand estaría probablemente enfermo aún. Joachim se dirigió a la clínica. Bertrand, efectivamente, se encontraba todavía allí; habían tenido que operarlo. Joachim estaba sinceramente turbado por haber descuidado tanto al enfermo y se dispuso a contarle el gran acontecimiento, ya inminente, como una especie de excusa por no haberse interesado por su enfermedad: «Pero, querido Bertrand, no puedo importunarle continuamente con mis asuntos privados». Bertrand sonrió, y en su sonrisa había algo de solicitud femenina, o médica: «Adelante, Pasenow, que tan terrible no es; me gusta escucharle». Y Joachim le contó que había pedido la mano de Elisabeth. «Ignoro si ella aceptará. Pero tan grande como mi deseo es mi temor a ser rechazado, porque esto me sumiría sin remedio en el espantoso caos de los últimos meses, del que usted ha sido testigo en gran parte, mientras que junto a ella espero hallar de nuevo el camino hacia la libertad.» Bertrand sonrió de nuevo: «Hermosas palabras, Pasenow, aunque yo no me casaría por ello con usted; pero no tema, estoy convencido de que pronto podremos darle la enhorabuena». Qué repugnante cinismo; este hombre es realmente un mal amigo, mejor dicho, no es un amigo, aunque hay que admitir ahora en su disculpa los atenuantes de los celos y la decepción. Joachim, por lo tanto, no quiso atenerse a sus cínicas palabras sino que, siguiendo el hilo de sus pensamientos, le preguntó: «¿Y qué debo hacer si ella dice que no?». Bertrand respondió lo que él quería oír: «No dirá que no». Lo dijo con tal firmeza y seguridad que Joachim experimentó de nuevo aquella sensación de protección que tantas veces había sentido fluir de

Bertrand. Casi le pareció injusto que Elisabeth lo prefiriera a él, el inseguro, y que tuviera que renunciar al guía seguro e incondicional. Y como para constatarlo ante sí mismo, dijo una voz en su interior: «Camaradas en el uniforme del rey». Y de repente vio a Bertrand de comandante. Pero ¿de dónde le venía su aplomo? ¿Cómo podía él saber que Elisabeth no diría que no? ¿Por qué sonreía irónicamente al decirlo? ¿Qué sabía este hombre? Y ahora Joachim se arrepintió de haberse confiado a él.

Bertrand tenía sobrados motivos para sonreír con ironía o, mejor dicho, para sonreír como quien está al cabo de la calle, pero su sonrisa era simplemente de benevolencia.

Elisabeth, sin más, lo había ido a ver el día anterior. Fue a la clínica y pidió que él acudiera a la sala de visitas. Bertrand, a pesar de sus dolores, bajó de inmediato. Era una visita fuera de lo común y, desde luego, no correspondía a las costumbres tradicionales; pero Elisabeth no se esforzó en paliar esta contravención de las reglas sociales; con visible excitación le dijo sin preámbulos:

—Joachim ha pedido mi mano.

—Si usted le ama, no hay ningún problema.

—No le amo.

—Entonces tampoco hay ningún problema: sencillamente le dará usted calabazas.

—¿O sea que usted no quiere ayudarme?

—Me temo, Elisabeth, que nadie puede hacerlo.

—Yo pensé que usted podría.

—Yo no quería volver a verla.

—¿No siente usted ninguna amistad por mí?

—No lo sé, Elisabeth.

—Joachim me ama.

—Por desgracia, el amor exige cierta inteligencia, sabiduría casi. Permítame, pues, que ponga un poco en duda este amor. Ya se lo advertí en una ocasión.

—Es usted un mal amigo.

—No, pero hay momentos en que uno ha de ser absolutamente sincero.

—¿Se puede ser, pues, demasiado tonto para el amor?

—Es precisamente lo que acabo de decir.

—Tal vez yo también sea demasiado tonta…

—Escuche, Elisabeth, no nos metamos en tales consideraciones. No son razones que puedan hacerle a uno decidir sobre su vida.

—Tal vez le ame… Hubo un tiempo en que no me disgustaba la idea de este matrimonio.

Elisabeth estaba sentada en un amplio sillón de enfermo, que habían traído a la sala de visitas, y miraba al suelo.

—¿Por qué ha venido usted, Elisabeth? No ha venido para pedir un consejo que nadie puede darle.

—Usted no quiere ayudarme.

—Ha venido porque no puede soportar que alguien huya de usted.

—Para mí esto es muy serio… No debe tomarlo a la ligera… Demasiado serio para que usted lo aproveche otra vez para decirme cosas desagradables. Creí hallar en usted una especie de protección…

—Pero tengo que decirle la verdad. Precisamente por esto tengo que decirle la verdad. Usted ha venido porque cree, en cierto modo, que yo estoy fuera de su mundo, en alguna parte donde usted piensa que podría existir una tercera instancia junto a la vulgar alternativa: le amo, no le amo.

—Quizá sea así. Ya no lo sé.

—Y ha venido porque sabe que la amo, se lo dije con toda claridad, y porque quiere demostrarme hasta dónde me puede llevar mi forma un tanto absurda del amor. —La miró de soslayo—: Tal vez para comprobar con qué rapidez lo extraño se puede convertir en conocido…

—¡No es verdad!

—Seamos sinceros, Elisabeth. Se trata, tanto para usted como para mí, de saber si se casaría usted conmigo. O, mejor, de si usted me ama.

—Señor Von Bertrand, ¡cómo se aprovecha usted de la situación!

—No, no debería haber dicho eso, porque sabe perfectamente que no es así. Usted se encuentra ante una decisión vital y no puede perderse en convencionalismos. Naturalmente se trata de saber si una mujer quiere a un hombre como amante y no de si pretenden fundar un hogar en común. Si censuro algo a Joachim, es que no haya puesto en claro con usted lo único realmente esencial, y que la haya degradado con esa petición de mano a los padres. Tenga usted cuidado, después vendrá aquello de ponerse de rodillas.

—Usted quiere torturarme otra vez. No debería haber venido.

—No, no debería haber venido, porque yo no quería volver a verla; pero tú tenías que venir, porque tú

me…

Ella se tapó los oídos.

—Mejor dicho, porque usted cree, desde lejos, que me podría amar.

—No me torture; ¿acaso no he sufrido ya bastante?

Yacía en el sillón con las manos en las sienes, los ojos cerrados y la cabeza hacia atrás. También en Lestow solía adoptar esta postura, y este deslizarse en lo habitual le hizo sonreír y le llenó casi de ternura. Estaba de pie detrás de ella. El brazo en cabestrillo le dolía y lo dejaba indefenso. Pero logró inclinarse y rozar con sus labios los de ella. Elisabeth se rebeló:

—Esto es una locura.

—No, solo es una despedida.

Con una voz tan pálida como su rostro, Elisabeth dijo:

—Usted no debía, usted no…

—¿Quién debe besarla, Elisabeth?

—Usted no me ama.

Bertrand dio unos pasos por la habitación. El brazo le dolía y notaba que tenía fiebre. Ella tenía razón, era una locura. De repente se volvió y quedó muy cerca de ella, su voz sonó involuntariamente amenazadora:

—¿Yo no te amo?

Elisabeth permanecía inmóvil, con los brazos caídos, y dejó que él le echara la cabeza hacia atrás. Y en pleno rostro él repitió amenazador: «¿Yo no te amo?», y ella tuvo la impresión de que iba a morderla en la boca, pero se convirtió en un beso. Y la rigidez de la boca de Elisabeth se transformó incomprensiblemente en una sonrisa, desapareció la laxitud de sus manos inertes y las levantó, liberadas por el empuje de sus sentimientos, para aferrarse con fuerza a los hombros de Bertrand y no soltarlos jamás.

—Cuidado, Elisabeth, ahí es donde tengo la herida.

Ella se desprendió asustada: «Perdone». Pero entonces las fuerzas la abandonaron: se desplomó abatida en el sillón. El se sentó en el brazo, le sacó los alfileres del sombrero y le acarició el rubio cabello: «Qué hermosa eres y cómo te quiero». Ella guardó silencio, dejó que él le tomara la mano, sintió el calor febril de la mano del hombre y el fuego de su rostro cuando se acercó de nuevo. Y al repetir él ardientemente «te quiero», ella sacudió la cabeza, pero le abandonó sus labios. Por fin pudo llorar.

Bertrand, sentado todavía en el brazo del sillón, le acariciaba levemente el cabello:

—Siento deseo de ti.

Ella contestó débilmente:

—Esto no es verdad.

—Siento deseo de ti.

Elisabeth no respondió; su mirada se perdió en el vacío. Él dejó de acariciarla; se había levantado y repitió:

—Te deseo de un modo que no se puede expresar con palabras.

—¿Y te vas? —dijo ella con una sonrisa.

—Sí.

Ella le miró incrédula e interrogativa. Él repitió:

—No, no nos veremos más.

Ella seguía sin comprender. Bertrand sonreía:

—¿Eres capaz de imaginar que yo ahora pidiera tu mano a tu padre? ¿Que renegara de cuanto he dicho? Sería una comedia terriblemente mezquina, una burda trampa de jugador.

Elisabeth empezaba a entrever algo, pero aún no acababa de comprender:

—Pero ¿por qué? ¿Por qué?

No puedo pedirte que seas mi amante, que vengas conmigo. Claro que podría pedírtelo y tú terminarías por hacerlo… Tal vez por romanticismo, tal vez porque ahora realmente me quieres… ahora, naturalmente. Oh, tú… —se sumergieron en un beso—. Pero en definitiva no puedo ponerte en una situación equívoca, aunque pudiera ser para ti más valiosa que, digámoslo abiertamente, que la boda con Joachim.

Elisabeth le miró con asombro.

—¿Piensa usted todavía que me puedo casar con él?

—Claro que sí. —Y, para salvarse de aquella tensión insoportable mediante una broma, consultó el reloj —. Hace veinte minutos que los dos pensamos en ello. O la idea tenía que haber sido insoportable hace veinte minutos, o ahora es soportable.

—No es momento de bromear… —con angustia—. ¿O hablas en serio?

—No lo sé… Nadie puede saberlo de sí mismo.

—O eludes la cuestión o es que disfrutas torturándome… Es usted un cínico.

—¿Debo engañarte? —dijo Bertrand muy serio.

—Tal vez te engañas a ti mismo… Tal vez porque tú… no sé por qué… pero hay algo falso en todo esto… No, tú no me quieres.

—Soy egoísta.

—Tú no me quieres.

—Te quiero.

Ella le miró abierta y seriamente:

—¿He de casarme, pues, con Joachim?

—A pesar de todo, no puedo decirte que no.

Elisabeth separó sus manos de las de Bertrand y permaneció largo tiempo sentada en silencio. Después se levantó, buscó su sombrero, puso los alfileres:

—Adiós, me casaré. Tal vez sea cinismo, pero no te puede sorprender. Tal vez estamos cometiendo con nosotros el peor de los crímenes… La paz sea contigo.

—La paz sea contigo, Elisabeth, no olvides estos momentos. Es mi única venganza respecto a Joachim… No podré olvidarte nunca.

Ella le pasó la mano por la mejilla. «Tienes fiebre», dijo, y salió rápidamente de la habitación.

Esto fue lo que había ocurrido y Bertrand lo pagó con otro acceso de fiebre. Pero le parecía justo, le parecía bien; creaba una distancia entre ayer y hoy. Y le permitía contemplar a Joachim, ahora sentado ante él, en la misma casa —¿era la misma?—, con la benevolencia de siempre. No, hubiera sido grotesco. Así pues, dijo: «Pierda usted cuidado, Pasenow, ya toca el puerto del matrimonio. Y que sea muy feliz». Joachim no pudo evitar pensar de nuevo que era un hombre cínico e innoble, y sin embargo se sintió agradecido y tranquilizado. Tal vez fuera el recuerdo del padre, o la simple presencia de Bertrand, pero la idea del matrimonio se mezclaba extrañamente con la imagen de una silenciosa habitación de enfermo por la que se deslizaban monjas vestidas de blanco. Delicada y monjil era Elisabeth, blanca sobre su nube de plata, y recordó el cuadro de una Madona, una Asunción, que creía haber visto en Dresde. Tomó su gorra de la percha. Joachim se sentía empujado por Bertrand a este matrimonio, y tuvo la extraña ocurrencia de que Bertrand pretendía con ello degradarle a lo civil, quitarle su uniforme y su puesto en el regimiento, a fin de ascender él a comandante en su lugar; y cuando Bertrand le tendió la mano para despedirse, Joachim no se dio cuenta de que tenía mucha fiebre. Agradeció a Bertrand sus palabras y se alejó, rígido y cuadrado, enfundado en su larga guerrera. Bertrand oyó el suave tintineo de las espuelas en la escalera y no pudo dejar de pensar que ahora Joachim pasaba por delante de la sala de visitas.

Su petición había sido aceptada. De todos modos, le escribía el barón, Elisabeth no quería festejar aún oficialmente los esponsales. Tenía cierto miedo a dar el paso definitivo, pero Joachim estaba invitado a cenar con ellos al día siguiente.

A pesar de que todavía no se podía considerar un auténtico noviazgo, a pesar de que ni por parte de Elisabeth ni por parte de los futuros suegros se le ofreció a Joachim el familiar tuteo, a pesar de que la conversación en la mesa se mantuvo un tanto rígida, reinaba, sin embargo, una apenas perceptible atmósfera de fiesta, especialmente en el momento en que el barón hizo tintinear su copa y manifestó con hermosas palabras que una familia era un todo cerrado y este todo no admitía fácilmente un nuevo miembro, pero cuando esto ocurría por designio divino, debía ocurrir de todo corazón, y el amor, que mantenía unida a la familia, abarcaría también al recién llegado. La baronesa tenía lágrimas en los ojos y retuvo emocionada la mano de su marido, mientras este hablaba del amor, y Joachim tuvo la cálida sensación de que todo le iría bien aquí; en el regazo de la familia, se dijo, y le vino a la mente la Sagrada Familia. Sí, Bertrand, probablemente, habría sonreído y se habría burlado del discurso del barón, pero este tipo de bromas resultaban excesivamente fáciles. Las incomprensibles agudezas con que Bertrand animaba la conversación en la mesa —¡cuán lejos estaba todo aquello!— eran de seguro más impugnables que el íntimo sentimiento que reflejaban las palabras del barón. Luego hicieron entrechocar las copas en un brindis sonoro y el barón exclamó: «¡Por el futuro!».

Después de la cena dejaron solos a los jóvenes para que pudieran hablar. Se sentaron en la sala de música, recientemente renovada con muebles tapizados de seda negra y adornados con protectores de encaje obra de la baronesa y de Elisabeth, y, mientras Joachim buscaba las palabras adecuadas, oyó que Elisabeth le decía, en tono casi festivo: «O sea que quiere usted casarse conmigo, Joachim. ¿Lo ha pensado bien?». Qué poco digno de una dama, pensó. Se diría que era Bertrand quien hablaba. ¿Qué debía hacer él ahora? ¿Tenía que hincar la rodilla en el suelo y presentarle su petición de mano? La fortuna le sonreía, pues el taburete donde se había sentado era tan bajo que, al volverse hacia Elisabeth, la rodilla casi le rozaba el suelo y si uno quería verlo así podía considerar su gesto como un arrodillarse. Permaneció, pues, en esta postura un tanto forzada y dijo: «¿Puedo concebir esperanzas?». Elisabeth no contestó; él levantó la

mirada hacia ella; la muchacha había echado la cabeza hacia atrás y tenía los párpados casi cerrados. Al mirar su rostro, sintió que era profundamente desagradable que un fragmento de paisaje pudiera insertarse en una casa. Ah, este era el recuerdo que tanto había temido, era el mediodía bajo los árboles otoñales, era la imagen desvanecida por cuya causa él casi había deseado que el consentimiento del barón se demorara más. Porque más irritante que el hermano en el rostro de la mujer es el paisaje que lo cubre totalmente, que toma posesión de él, que absorbe de tal modo el rostro deshumanizado que ni siquiera Helmuth podía servir de ayuda para volver a apresar lo fluyente y desvanecido. Ella dijo: «¿Ha hablado con su amigo Bertrand sobre este proyecto matrimonial?». Joachim pudo negarlo sin ser del todo infiel a la verdad. «Pero ¿lo sabe?», insistió Elisabeth. Sí, respondió Joachim, él le había insinuado sus intenciones. «¿Y qué dijo?» Se había limitado a desearle buena suerte. «¿Le tiene usted mucho apego, Joachim?» Joachim sentía que la voz de Elisabeth y sus palabras le hacían bien; le confirmaban que estaba sentado frente a un ser humano y no frente a un paisaje. Sin embargo, resultaba inquietante. ¿Qué pretendía con estas alusiones a Bertrand? ¿Adonde quería ir a parar? En cierto modo era inoportuno hablar de Bertrand en aquel momento, por más que fuera un alivio haber encontrado un tema de conversación. Y, como no podía dejar escapar esta oportunidad y además se sentía obligado a ser totalmente sincero con su futura esposa, dijo vacilante:

—No lo sé; en realidad tengo siempre la impresión de que él es la parte activa de nuestra amistad, pero a menudo soy yo quien lo busca. No sé si esto puede calificarse de tenerle-mucho-apego.

—¿Le inquieta?

—Exactamente, esta es la palabra… Siempre me inquieta.

—Él es un hombre inquieto y por eso mismo es también inquietante.

Joachim reconoció que así era, y sintió fija en él la mirada de Elisabeth, y se admiró de nuevo de que aquellas estrellas convexas y transparentes, a derecha e izquierda de una nariz, pudieran enviar algo parecido a una mirada. ¿Qué es una mirada? Se llevó las manos a los ojos y ahora era Ruzena la que estaba allí, eran los ojos de Ruzena los que rozó emocionado a través de los párpados. No podía imaginarse a sí mismo acariciando alguna vez los ojos de Elisabeth. Tal vez era cierto lo que uno había aprendido en la escuela y había frialdades capaces de causar heridas de fuego; «frialdad del universo», se le ocurrió ahora, «frialdad de las estrellas». Allí flotaba Elisabeth sobre su nube de plata, intocable su rostro fluyente y desvanecido, y le pareció una cruel mortificación que sus padres la hubieran besado al levantarse de la mesa. Pero ¿de qué esfera provenía aquel en cuya criatura y víctima casi se había convertido Elisabeth? Si Dios les había enviado, a él y a ella, un tentador, ¡formaba parte de las pruebas impuestas liberar a Elisabeth de estas afrentas terrenales! El trono de Dios se asienta en la frialdad absoluta y sus mandamientos son despiadados, se engarzan unos con otros como las ruedas dentadas de las máquinas de Borsig, y todo aquello era tan coercitivo que a Joachim casi le tranquilizó ver un único camino de salvación, el recto camino del deber, aunque él mismo tuviera que abrasarse en él.

—Pronto se irá a la India —dijo Joachim.

—Sí, a la India —asintió ella.

—Lo he dudado mucho —dijo él—, porque solo puedo ofrecerle a usted una vida sencilla en el campo.

—Nosotros somos distintos a él —replicó ella.

A Joachim le emocionó que hubiera empleado el término «nosotros»:

—Tal vez está desarraigado y es posible que anhele regresar.

—Toda persona está encerrada en sí misma —contestó Elisabeth.

—Pero ¿no nos hemos quedado nosotros con la mejor parte? —preguntó Joachim.

—No lo sabemos —dijo Elisabeth.

—Claro que sí —replicó Joachim rebelándose—, porque él vive para los negocios y tiene que ser frío e insensible. Piense en sus padres, en las palabras de su padre. Él, sin embargo, llama a esto convencionalismo; le falta la verdadera intimidad, la cristiandad.

Enmudeció: ah, lo que había dicho no era verdad, porque lo que él esperaba de Dios y de Elisabeth no tenía el mismo significado que cuanto le habían enseñado a entender por hogar cristiano; pero precisamente porque esperaba mucho más de Elisabeth, quería elevar sus palabras hasta la esfera celeste, donde Elisabeth tenía que mostrársele como la más dulce e intangible Madona de plata. Tal vez ella tenía primero que morir, a fin de poder hablarle de este modo, pues tal y como estaba sentada, recostada hacia atrás, parecía Blancanieves en su ataúd de cristal, y era tal la suprema ternura y maravillosa viveza celestial de su rostro que aquel rostro apenas tenía semejanza con aquel que él había conocido en vida, antes de ser entretejido, terrible e inexorablemente, con el paisaje. El deseo de que Elisabeth estuviera muerta y de que su voz le comunicara angelicalmente el mensaje del más allá era muy fuerte, y la tensión provocada por este deseo alcanzó tal potencia que también Elisabeth sucumbió a aquella ola de angustiosa frialdad, ya que dijo: «Él no necesita, como nosotros, la cálida protección de la vida en común». Estas palabras tan terrenales decepcionaron a Joachim y, aunque la necesidad de protección que reflejaban le conmovió y le sugirió la imagen de María en su peregrinaje por la tierra antes de su ascensión al cielo, sabía, sin embargo, que sus

fuerzas no bastaban para darle tal protección, y, con duplicada decepción, deseó doblemente en su interior que una muerte dulce y suave los acogiera a los dos. Y como ante la muerte, en el aliento de lo eterno, cae la máscara del rostro, Joachim dijo: «Él hubiera sido siempre un extraño para usted». Y a los dos les pareció que estas palabras encerraban una enorme y significativa verdad, aunque apenas sabían ya que estaban hablando de Bertrand. El círculo de la luz de gas centelleaba como un revoloteo de mariposas amarillas, líneas negras en alas amarillas, sobre la corona de la lámpara que pendía sobre el túmulo revestido de negro sobre el que seguía sentado, inmóvil, Joachim, con el busto rígido y vuelto hacia un lado y la rodilla doblada; las puntillas blancas sobre la seda negra parecían dibujos de calaveras. Las palabras de Elisabeth fluyeron en la inmovilidad: «Él está más solo que los demás», y Joachim replicó: «Su demonio interior le arrastra». Elisabeth denegó, casi imperceptiblemente, con la cabeza: «Espera la plenitud…», y luego añadió, como tomando la idea de un recuerdo rígido y vidrioso: «Plenitud y conocimiento en la soledad y el extrañamiento». Joachim guardó silencio; luego, con repugnancia, siguió el hilo del pensamiento que, incomprensible y gélido, se erguía entre ellos: «Él es un extraño… Nos echa a todos, porque Dios quiere que estemos solos». «Sí, esto quieren», dijo Elisabeth, y no podía saberse si se había referido a Dios o a Bertrand; pero ya no importaba, pues la soledad que pendía sobre ella y sobre Joachim lo había invadido ya todo, y la habitación, pese a su familiar elegancia, se endureció más y más en una inmovilidad angustiosa; inmóviles los dos, les parecía como si el espacio que les rodeaba se ensanchara y las paredes cedieran y el aire fuera cada vez más sutil y frío, tan sutil que apenas podía sostener la voz. Y a pesar de que todo permanecía en inmóvil rigidez, los muebles, el piano en cuya negra superficie lacada todavía se reflejaba el círculo de las luces de gas, todo parecía no estar en el mismo lugar donde había estado anteriormente, y hasta los dragones dorados y las mariposas del negro biombo chino del rincón parecían haber sido también diluidos, absorbidos igualmente por las paredes que cedían, recubiertas de negros crespones. Las luces zumbaban con un suave silbido venenoso, y junto a su minúscula y mecánica vida, que surgía irónicamente por las rendijas indecentemente abiertas, no había ya ninguna otra vida. Ahora morirá muy pronto, pensó Joachim, y casi fue una confirmación oír la voz de ella en el vacío: «Su muerte será solitaria». Sonó como una sentencia de muerte o un conjuro, conjuro que él reafirmó: «Está enfermo y es posible que suceda muy pronto; tal vez en este mismo instante». «Sí», dijo Elisabeth desde el más allá, y fue como una gota que al caer se transformara en hielo, «sí, en este mismo instante.» Y en la petrificada incertidumbre de estos segundos en que la muerte estuvo junto a ellos, Joachim no supo si la muerte los rozaba a ellos dos, o a Bertrand o al padre; no supo si su madre estaba allí sentada, vigilando su muerte con la exactitud y placidez con que vigilaba el ordeñar en el establo o la agonía del padre, y ahora vio con claridad que el padre tenía frío y que anhelaba la cálida oscuridad del establo. ¿No era mucho mejor morir ahora con Elisabeth, dejarse conducir por ella hacia la claridad diáfana que flota sobre las tinieblas? Y dijo: «Le envolverá una horrible oscuridad y nadie vendrá a ayudarlo». Pero Elisabeth dijo con voz dura: «Nadie debe venir», y con idéntico tono duro, gris, sin tonalidades, siguió hablando al vacío, con el mismo aliento, que ya no era aliento: «Seré su mujer, Joachim», y ni ella misma supo si lo había dicho, pues Joachim seguía inmóvil, con el busto inclinado, y no respondió. No sucedió nada y, aunque no duró más que el instante en que un ojo se apaga y endurece, la tensión estaba tan llena de incertidumbre y de vacío, que Elisabeth repitió: «Sí, seré su mujer». Pero Joachim no quería oírlo, pues la voz de Elisabeth le obligaba a retroceder por un camino sin retorno. Intentó, con un gran esfuerzo, volverse hacia ella; lo logró solo a duras penas, únicamente la rodilla doblada tocaba ahora efectivamente el suelo; inclinó la frente, cubierta de un sudor frío, y sus labios, secos y helados como pergamino, rozaron la mano de ella, una mano tan fría que él no se atrevió a cogerla, ni siquiera cuando la habitación volvió a encogerse y los muebles recobraron sus antiguos emplazamientos.

Y así permanecieron, hasta que oyeron la voz del barón en la pieza contigua. «Tenemos que entrar», dijo Elisabeth. Entonces pasaron al salón, profusamente iluminado, y Elisabeth dijo: «Nos hemos prometido». «¡Hija mía!», exclamó la baronesa abrazándola con lágrimas en los ojos. Pero el barón, *cuyos* ojos no estaban menos húmedos, dijo: «Ahora debemos sentirnos muy felices y dar gracias a Dios por este día tan hermoso». Y Joachim le quiso por estas efusivas palabras y se sintió colocado bajo su protección.

Mientras regresaba a su casa, en el apático dormitar provocado por su cansancio y por el traqueteo del coche, fue adquiriendo forma la idea de que su padre y Bertrand habían muerto, y casi le sorprendió no hallar en su habitación ninguna triste noticia, como habría correspondido a la recuperada exactitud de la vida. Fuera *como* fuese, *ni siquiera a un* amigo muerto se le pueden ocultar unos esponsales. Este pensamiento no le abandonó y a la mañana siguiente adquirió visos de certidumbre, no precisamente certeza de muerte, pero sí certeza de no-existencia: el padre y Bertrand se habían ido de este mundo y, pese a que él era en parte culpable de estas muertes, *todo permanecía en una* apacible indiferencia, *y ni* siquiera tuvo que plantearse una vez más si era Ruzena o Elisabeth la mujer que él había robado a otro. Se le había encomendado la misión de seguir a este otro, de no perderle de vista, y el camino por el que había tenido que seguirle tocaba ahora a su fin, el secreto se había extinguido, solo restaba despedirse *del* amigo muerto. «Una buena y una mala noticia a la vez», se dijo. Tenía tiempo; dijo al cochero que se detuviera, encargó

flores para la baronesa y para su novia, y se dirigió sin prisa a la clínica. Pero cuando entró en la clínica, nadie le habló de la desgracia; como si nada hubiera ocurrido, le indicaron, como siempre, la habitación de Bertrand; hasta que no encontró a la hermana en el pasillo, no se enteró de que Bertrand había pasado muy mala noche, pero ahora se encontraba mejor. Joachim repitió mecánicamente: «Se encuentra mejor… Estupendo, estupendo». Era como si Bertrand le hubiera engañado una vez más, como si lo hubiera defraudado, y casi tuvo el pleno convencimiento de ello al ser recibido por él con estas animadas palabras: «Vaya, vaya, me parece que hoy ya se le puede dar la enhorabuena». ¿Cómo lo sabe?, se preguntó Joachim, y, a pesar de su irritación, se sintió casi orgulloso, porque en su nueva situación de prometido su desconfianza quedaba, en cierto modo, justificada: sí, se sentía feliz de anunciarle sus esponsales. Pero Bertrand parecía estar muy sereno: «Usted sabe que le aprecio, Pasenow», dijo, y a Joachim le pareció una impertinencia, «y por eso les deseo de todo corazón, a usted y a su prometida, que sean muy felices». Sus palabras sonaban de nuevo sinceras y cariñosas, y sin embargo resultaban sarcásticas: él, que siempre lo sabía todo de antemano, él, que lo había planeado y querido, aunque fuera únicamente como instrumento de una voluntad superior, él se escapaba ahora, al ver la obra consumada, con una llana y cordial felicitación. Joachim se sentía agotado; se sentó junto a la mesa que estaba en el centro de la habitación, miró a Bertrand, que yacía en la cama rubio, casi con aspecto de muchacha, y dijo muy serio: «Espero que ahora todo vaya bien», y Bertrand, con aquella despreocupada seguridad en sí mismo que siempre había tranquilizado e inquietado a Joachim, dijo: «Tenga usted la seguridad, querido Pasenow, de que todo irá perfectamente… al menos para usted». Joachim repitió: «Sí, perfectamente», y luego sin comprender: «¿Por qué solo para mí?». Bertrand sonrió e hizo un ligero gesto despectivo con la mano: «Bueno, nosotros… nosotros somos una raza que no tiene remedio», pero no dio ninguna explicación más, sino que al cabo de un momento preguntó sin transición: «¿Y cuándo es la boda?», de modo que Joachim, olvidando la otra cuestión, respondió enseguida que había tiempo aún, que ante todo había que tener en cuenta la enfermedad de su padre. Bertrand observaba a Joachim, sentado tieso y correcto junto a la mesa, de cara a él. «Para casarse no es necesario que regrese usted inmediatamente a la hacienda», dijo Bertrand. Joachim se asustó: ¡había sucedido todo inútilmente! Bertrand había hablado siempre de la necesidad de hacerse cargo de la finca, había provocado la infelicidad de Ruzena, y ahora decía que no necesitaba volver allí, como si quisiera quitarle la alegría de sus posesiones y robarle, además, su hogar paterno. Con mil subterfugios Bertrand lo había arrastrado a todo esto, y ahora declinaba toda responsabilidad, despreciaba incluso la victoria de haberlo hecho descender hasta su nivel, hasta lo civil, ¡también aquí lo rechazaba! Era simplemente hacer el mal por el mal, y Joachim lo miró con indignado asombro. Bertrand solo notó su mirada interrogadora: «Bien, hace poco usted dijo que estaba a punto de ser ascendido a capitán de caballería, y es de suponer que querrá esperar dicho ascenso. Capitán de la reserva suena mucho mejor que teniente de la reserva» —ahora se avergüenza de ser subteniente, pensó Joachim, y se permitió la breve sacudida reglamentaria—. «Y durante esos meses se habrá visto cómo evoluciona la enfermedad de su señor padre.» A Joachim le hubiera gustado decirle que los oficiales casados le parecían tipos raros y que suspiraba por regresar al hogar de sus antepasados, pero no podía decir esto y se limitó a manifestar que lo apuntado por Bertrand satisfacería también el íntimo deseo de sus futuros suegros, quienes verían con agrado que la nueva casa del Westend fuera habitada por Elisabeth. «Entonces, mi querido Pasenow, todo se arregla al gusto de todos», dijo Bertrand, y estas palabras volvían a reflejar una arrogancia poco noble e inoportuna. «Además, seguro que puede usted apresurar el ascenso, si comunica a su comandante que tiene la intención de dejar el servicio activo en cuanto reciba el oficio.» También en esto tenía razón, pero era molesto que Bertrand se atreviera a inmiscuirse en asuntos militares. Cogió pensativo el bastón de Bertrand que estaba sobre la mesa, miró el puño, siguió con el dedo la punta de goma de su extremo: un bastón de convaleciente. Que precisamente él lo empujara a la boda le hizo recelar de nuevo. ¿Qué se ocultaba detrás de sus palabras? El día anterior él y Elisabeth habían dicho a los padres que no tenían prisa en celebrar la boda, habían enumerado una serie de razones, y ahora Bertrand quería barrer de un soplo todas estas razones. «Pero no podemos precipitar la boda», dijo Joachim con terquedad. «Bien», opinó Bertrand, «solo siento que tendré que enviar un telegrama de felicitación desde muy lejos, desde la India o desde quién sabe dónde. Porque en cuanto pueda sostenerme medianamente en pie, pienso emprender un viaje… Este asunto me ha afectado un poco.» ¿Qué asunto? ¿Aquel rasguño? Bertrand, ciertamente, tenía aspecto de estar sufriendo; los convalecientes llevan siempre bastón; pero ¿qué había sucedido antes? ¿Qué sabía Bertrand de la noche anterior? En realidad Bertrand no tenía derecho a irse de viaje antes de que se hubiera aclarado todo aquello, y Joachim pensó que probablemente Helmuth, que se había enfrentado a su adversario abiertamente, era mucho más noble que él mismo: ¿no se trataba, también en este caso, de explicación o muerte? Pero él quería las dos cosas y al mismo tiempo no quería ninguna de las dos. El padre tenía razón: él carecía de honor, tanto como ese Bertrand, un amigo al que apenas podía llamarse amigo. Y sin embargo era casi una liberación, pues probablemente entre las intenciones del padre estaba la de no invitar a Bertrand a la boda. A pesar de ello, escuchó a Bertrand con tranquilidad: «Otra cosa, Pasenow; tengo la impresión de que la hacienda, al no ocuparse de ella su madre y dado que no funciona automáticamente,

necesita alguien que la dirija. Su señor padre, en su estado, puede causar aún serias dificultades. Discúlpeme, usted, pero me siento obligado a llamarle su atención sobre la posibilidad de obtener una inhabilitación. Y busque usted un administrador experto; vale la pena pagarlo. Creo que debería hablar de ello con su suegro. A fin de cuentas, también él es agricultor». Sí, hablaba como un vil agente provocador, pero Joachim tuvo que darle las gracias por el consejo, cuya buena intención comprendía, y tuvo también que manifestarle la esperanza de poder verlo a menudo antes de su curación. «Con mucho gusto», dijo Bertrand, «y póngame a los pies de su novia.» Después se reclinó agotado en la almohada.

Dos días más tarde Joachim recibió una carta en la que Bertrand le comunicaba que su estado había mejorado notablemente y que se trasladaba a una clínica de Hamburgo para estar más cerca de la sede de sus negocios. Pero estaba seguro de que volverían a verse antes de su viaje a Oriente. Dada la arrogante naturalidad con que Bertrand preveía su próximo encuentro, Joachim decidió impedirlo a toda costa. Pero le dolió tener que prescindir en adelante de la firmeza, habilidad y mundología de su amigo.

Detrás de la Leipziger Platz se encuentra una tienda que, exteriormente, se diferencia apenas de las vecinas, si bien llama la atención que sus escaparates no expongan a la vista ningún tipo de mercancía y que unos cristales opacos, con hermosos grabados pompeyanos y renacentistas, impiden mirar al interior. Pero esta característica la comparte la tienda con muchos bancos y agencias, y los anuncios pegados a los cristales, que rompen lamentablemente la ornamentación, tampoco tienen en realidad nada de extraño. En estos anuncios se leía la palabra «India» y un vistazo al letrero de encima de la puerta indicaba que en la tienda se ofrecían «Panoramas imperiales».

Si uno entra, se encuentra primeramente en una estancia agradablemente iluminada y caldeada, donde una señora ya mayor de aspecto simpático atiende la caja tras una mesita y vende entradas para la visita del establecimiento. Pero la mayoría de visitantes solo utilizan esta caja para hacerse sellar sus abonos e intercambiar unas palabras amables con la anciana. Cuando el viejo empleado, que surge del negro cortinaje del fondo, solicita, con un gesto de disculpa, un poco de paciencia, el visitante toma asiento con un ligero suspiro en una de las sillas de rejilla y sigue charlando, observa también con recelo la puerta de cristal que da a la calle, y si aparece otro visitante, lo mira con celosa y avergonzada hostilidad. Después se oye un sordo ruido de sillas tras los cortinajes y el hombre que sale parpadea unos instantes cegado por la luz y se aleja rápidamente, tras un breve saludo a la anciana, con la cabeza baja y sin mirar a los que aguardan, como si también se avergonzara. El que espera impaciente se levanta entonces a toda prisa, a fin de que nadie se le adelante, interrumpe bruscamente su conversación con la anciana y desaparece tras el cortinaje protector. Es poco frecuente que los visitantes hablen entre sí, pese a que muchos de ellos tienen que conocerse después de tantos años, y solo algunos viejos desvergonzados se atreven a hablar, además de con la anciana, con los que aguardan, y a elogiar el espectáculo, pero en la mayoría de los casos únicamente reciben monosílabos por respuesta.

En el interior, sin embargo, reina la oscuridad y uno se inclina a creer que se trata de una vieja y pesada oscuridad almacenada allí durante años. El empleado te coge suavemente de la mano y te conduce con cuidado a un asiento redondo y sin respaldo que te aguarda. Ves ante ti dos ojos claros que te miran un tanto fantasmagóricamente desde un fondo negro, y bajo esos ojos hay una boca, cuyos rasgos rectilíneos quedan suavizados por la pálida luz que la ilumina. Poco a poco te vas dando cuenta de que te hallas frente a la imagen de una especie de templo poligonal, de la que forma parte la pared a la que te han conducido y ante la cual se encuentra tu asiento; ves también que a tu derecha y a tu izquierda está sentado un devoto, que mantiene los ojos fijos en los ojos de la pared, y tú haces lo mismo, después de haber echado una ojeada al cristal iluminado y cuadrado y haber constatado que tiene escritas las palabras «Palacio del gobierno en Calcuta». Pero mientras tú miras solamente aquellos ojos abiertos ante ti, el edificio gubernamental desaparece, a un toque de campana, con un chirrido metálico: lo ves deslizarse lentamente y aparece un nuevo paisaje, y te sientes casi estafado, pero suena otra vez una campanilla, el paisaje sufre una ligera sacudida, como si quisiera colocarse mejor para que tú lo contemples, y queda fijo. Ves palmeras y un camino muy bien cuidado; en el fondo, a la sombra, hay un hombre con un traje claro sentado en un banco; un surtidor eleva al aire un penacho de agua que tiene forma de látigo; no estás tranquilo hasta que puedes leer en el cristal iluminado: «Vista del parque real de Calcuta». Después sigue otra vez la campanilla, un deslizarse de palmeras, bancos, edificios, mástiles, otra sacudida, otro campanillazo, y, bajo los rayos del sol: «Vista del puerto de Bombay». El hombre que antes estaba sentado en el banco del parque real se encuentra ahora en primer plano con un casco colonial, sobre las enormes piedras del malecón. Apoyado en un bastón de paseo, está rígido, fascinado por los aparejos de los buques, por sus chimeneas y sus grúas, fascinado ante los montones de fardos de algodón acumulados en el muelle; lo mira todo fascinado, y su rostro no se puede distinguir en la sombra. Pero tal vez penetre en el marco mágico que, coloreado suavemente sobre fondo pardo, forma un cofre abstracto, un viaje entre tú y la imagen, y tal vez se mueva por entre los maderos con maravillosa libertad, y tú reconozcas en él a Bertrand, que te advertirá, suave aunque terriblemente, que nunca más lo podrás borrar de tu vida, por lejos que se encuentre. Pero tal vez es

solo fruto de tu imaginación, ya que Dios le envía otra vez la señal del campanillazo y él, sin saludar, rígido e inmóvil, sin dar un solo paso, se desliza y se va. Miras a tu vecino de la izquierda, por si aparece allí, pero en su recuadro luminoso lees «Palacio del gobierno en Calcuta», y entonces tienes casi la esperanza de que Bertrand ha aparecido allí solo para ti, solo para saludarte a ti. Pero no tienes tiempo de reflexionar sobre ello, porque cuando vuelves a mirar tus dos cristales te espera una grata sorpresa: la «Madre indígena de Ceilán» no está únicamente iluminada por los dorados rayos del sol, sino que aparece con sus colores naturales; sonríe con blancos dientes entre labios rojos y tal vez espera al blanco con que ha venido de Occidente porque ha despreciado a las europeas. También los «Templos de Delhi» resplandecen con colores orientales al fondo de la cajita parda: allí el infiel puede aprender que incluso las razas inferiores saben servir a Dios. Pero ¿no dijo él mismo que eran los mauritanos quienes debían restablecer el reino de Cristo? Miras asustado el hormigueo de figuras de color pardo y no te disgusta oír la señal que las ahuyentará para dejar paso a «Partida para la caza del elefante». Ahí están ahora los vigorosos cuadrúpedos y uno dobla muellemente una pata anterior. El lugar está todo cubierto de arena blanca y fina y si, deslumbrado, apartas la vista unos instantes, descubres, en la parte superior del cristal opaco, un pequeño botón, del que tiras jugueteando. Inmediatamente, para tu satisfacción, la imagen se transforma en un suave claro de luna, de modo que, a tu voluntad, puedes hacer partir a los cazadores de día o de noche. Ahora que ya no te hiere la claridad del sol, lo aprovechas para observar a los cazadores que se alejan, y si tus ojos no te engañan, es justamente Bertrand quien está sentado detrás del oscuro conductor del elefante, dentro de la canasta, con el fusil en la mano derecha, pronto a disparar augurando la muerte. Cambias la luz y ahora es de nuevo un hombre salvaje y extraño el que te sonríe, y el conductor del elefante apoya su lanza tras una oreja del animal, para indicarle que se ponga en marcha. Se deslizan en la espesura, pero tú no oyes el pateo del rebaño ni el bramido de los elefantes machos, porque, con un ligero campanilleo y un chirrido mecánico, un paisaje sucede al otro, extrañamente, sin transición, moviéndose hacia delante o hacia atrás, y si el hombre que pasa parece ser aquel a quien buscas eternamente, aquel a quien llamas eternamente, desaparece no obstante mientras tienes todavía su mano en la tuya, suena otra vez la señal y, antes de que te des cuenta, descubres que el vecino de tu derecha, al que ya habías mirado temerosamente, tiene la inscripción «Palacio del gobierno en Calcuta», y sabes que muy pronto habrá sonado tu hora. Entonces lanzas otra mirada de reojo para cerciorarte de que realmente aparecen las palmeras del jardín real, y como así ocurre, irremisiblemente, corres tu silla hacia atrás, el empleado acude presuroso y abandonas con un breve saludo el local, en cuya antesala otros ya están esperando y la señora vende abonos, y lo haces parpadeando ligeramente, subiéndote el cuello de la chaqueta, pobre infeliz que se ha entregado a un placer que no conoce.

En este establecimiento estuvieron Joachim y Elisabeth, cuando ella, acompañada por la dama de compañía, salió con él de compras por la ciudad, en vistas al ajuar y a su futuro hogar. Pues, aunque *sabían que* Bertrand estaba en Hamburgo, y nunca hablaban de él, la palabra India tenía para ellos un sonido mágico.

Fue una boda sencilla en Lestow. El estado de salud del padre era estacionario; vegetaba, ya no reconocía lo que le rodeaba y había que aceptar que podía continuar así durante años. La baronesa afirmaba que tanto para ella como para su marido era preferible una fiesta sencilla e íntima que una celebración con bombo y platillos, pero Joachim sabía cuán importantes eran para sus suegros las fiestas familiares y se sentía responsable de que su padre impidiera hacer las cosas con brillantez. También él, quizá, hubiera deseado un marco lujoso y lleno de gente, a fin de destacar el carácter social de este enlace ajeno a lo amoroso. Por otra parte, le parecía más propio de la seriedad y cristiandad de esta unión que él y Elisabeth se acercaran al altar sin ningún aparato mundano. Por eso se decidió no celebrar la boda en Berlín, a pesar de que en Lestow se presentaron toda serie de dificultades, difíciles de superar, especialmente sin el consejo de Bertrand. Joachim se negó a llevar a la novia a su casa la noche de bodas; le repugnaba pasar aquella noche bajo el mismo techo que el enfermo, y aún le parecía más inconcebible que Elisabeth tuviera que retirarse a su habitación en presencia de la servidumbre familiar; propuso pues que Elisabeth pasara la noche en Lestow, y él la pasaría a recoger a la mañana siguiente; sorprendentemente, esta propuesta chocó con la oposición de la baronesa, a quien tal solución parecía inconveniente: «Y aun en el caso de que nosotros estuviéramos de acuerdo, ¿qué pensarían los criados, con lo burdos que son?». Finalmente se decidió celebrar la ceremonia muy temprano para que la joven pareja tuviera tiempo de tomar el tren del mediodía. «Así llegaréis pronto a vuestro confortable hogar de Berlín», dijo la baronesa. Pero Joachim tampoco estaba de acuerdo. No, quedaba descartado, porque ellos querían seguir su viaje muy pronto por la mañana y quizá tomarían incluso el tren nocturno para Munich. Sí, los trenes nocturnos eran casi la solución más sencilla del problema conyugal, eran la escapatoria a las sonrisas maliciosas de los demás en el momento en que él fuera a acostarse con Elisabeth. Sin embargo dudaba sobre si, efectivamente, podrían seguir su viaje a Munich de inmediato; ¿podía imponerse a Elisabeth un viaje de noche, tras la tensión de la jornada? ¿Y cómo resultaría el día en Munich en espera de lo que iba a

acontecer después? Era evidente que habría sido imposible consultar estas cuestiones ni siquiera a Bertrand, tenía que resolverlas por sí mismo, pero todo hubiera resultado mucho más sencillo de haber tenido cerca a Bertrand. Intentó imaginar cómo habría reaccionado Bertrand en aquel caso y llegó a la conclusión de que nada impedía reservar habitación en el hotel Royal de Berlín; caso de que Elisabeth lo deseara, podían, de todos modos, proseguir su viaje. Y se sintió orgulloso de haber hallado por sí solo tan hábil solución.

El tiempo era completamente invernal, y los coches cerrados en los que se dirigieron a la iglesia avanzaban lentamente por la nieve. Joachim iba con su madre, quien, sentada ancha y cómodamente en el coche, no cesaba de repetir: «¡Tu padre se habría alegrado tanto! ¡Qué desgracia, Señor, qué desgracia!». Sí, eso hubiera faltado; Joachim estaba furioso; nadie le dejaba tiempo para el recogimiento que se imponía en aquella hora solemne, doblemente imprescindible para él, para quien aquel matrimonio significaba mucho más que fundar un hogar cristiano, significaba la liberación del lodo y del abismo, la promesa de la fe en el camino que lleva a Dios. Con su traje de novia, Elisabeth tenía más que nunca aspecto de Madona, parecía Blancanieves, y él tuvo que pensar en la leyenda de la novia que cayó muerta al pie del altar, porque descubrió de repente que bajo la figura del novio se ocultaba el maligno. Esta idea le obsesionó hasta tal punto que no oyó el *canto* del *coro ni* el *sermón* del *pastor, es más, se* propuso no escuchar, por miedo a tenerle que interrumpir para decirle que frente al altar se encontraba un hombre indigno, un relapso, alguien que profanaba el recinto sagrado, y se estremeció sobresaltado cuando tuvo que pronunciar el «sí», asustado también de que la ceremonia que había de ser para él la revelación de una vida nueva se hubiera desarrollado tan rápida e imperceptiblemente. Le reconfortó en cambio que llamaran a Elisabeth su mujer, sin serlo aún en realidad, y le pareció cruel que esta situación no pudiera prolongarse. Al regresar de la iglesia, él tomó su mano y dijo «esposa mía», y Elisabeth correspondió a la presión de su mano. Pero luego todo se mezcló en la confusión de los parabienes, del cambio de traje, de la partida, de modo que no se dieron cuenta de lo que había ocurrido hasta llegar a la estación.

Cuando Elisabeth subió al apartamento, él volvió la cabeza para no ser otra vez presa de pensamientos impuros. Estaban solos. Elisabeth se reclinó con aire cansado en un rincón y le sonrió débilmente. «Estás cansada, Elisabeth», le dijo, lleno de esperanza, contento por tener que cuidarla, de poder cuidarla. «Sí, estoy cansada, Joachim.» Pero él no se atrevió a proponerle que se quedaran en Berlín, por temor a que ella lo atribuyera a concupiscencia. El perfil de Elisabeth se dibujaba limpiamente contra la ventana, tras la cual se extendía la gris tarde invernal, y Joachim se alegró de que no reapareciera aquella temida y angustiosa visión en la que su rostro se transformaba en paisaje. Pero mientras la contemplaba, vio que la maleta, colocada sobre el asiento de enfrente, se dibujaba también sobre el horizonte gris, y le invadió un absurdo y exacerbado temor de que Elisabeth fuera una cosa, un objeto muerto, ni siquiera un paisaje. Se levantó rápidamente, como para arreglar algo de la maleta, pero se limitó a abrirla y sacar el cesto de las provisiones: era un regalo de boda, un pequeño milagro de finura, que podía usarse tanto para ir de viaje como para salir de caza; los mangos de los cuchillos y de los tenedores eran de marfil, con escenas de caza, que continuaban en el delicado cincelado de las partes metálicas, y ni siquiera el tapón de la botella de licor había escapado a esta ornamentación; entre los adornos se veían en todas las piezas las armas entrelazadas de Elisabeth y Joachim. La parte central del cesto estaba destinada a las provisiones de boda, y la baronesa la había llenado concienzudamente. Joachim rogó a Elisabeth que tomara algo y, como ella no había podido probar bocado en el refrigerio de la boda, lo hizo con gusto. «Nuestra primera comida de casados», dijo Joachim, y sirvió vino en las copas de plata, y Elisabeth brindó con él. Así pasaron el viaje y Joachim se reafirmó en su opinión de que el tren proporciona la mejor forma de vida matrimonial. Sí, empezaba a comprender a Bertrand, que pasaba gran parte de su tiempo en el tren. «¿Y si continuamos esta noche camino de Munich?», propuso, pero Elisabeth respondió que se sentía realmente muy fatigada y prefería interrumpir el viaje. Así pues, él hubo de confesarle que había previsto anticipadamente este deseo y que había reservado habitaciones.

Agradeció a Elisabeth que no perdiera su naturalidad, aunque quizá fuera una naturalidad solo aparente, ya que ella retrasó la hora de ir a dormir; pidió que fueran a cenar y estuvieron mucho tiempo en el comedor; los músicos que amenizaban las comidas habían guardado ya los instrumentos y quedaban pocos clientes en la casa; aunque para Joachim fuera agradable el retraso, experimentaba, sin embargo, otra vez aquella frialdad sutil que se esparcía por el aire de la estancia, aquella frialdad que en la tarde de su compromiso se había transformado en terrible presentimiento de muerte. Elisabeth pareció sentirlo también, pues dijo que ya era hora de acostarse.

Había llegado, pues, el momento. Elisabeth se había despedido de él con un cordial «buenas noches», y Joachim paseaba arriba y abajo por su habitación. ¿Debía acostarse? Contempló la cama abierta. Sin embargo, se había jurado a sí mismo hacer guardia ante la puerta de Elisabeth, custodiar su sueño celestial, a fin de que ella soñara eternamente sobre su nube de plata: pero de repente esto carecía de sentido, y todo parecía empujarle a ponerse cómodo. Se miró en el espejo y sintió la protección de su larga guerrera; era una desvergüenza que la gente se presentara a una boda vestida de frac. No obstante, debía pensar en lavarse y lentamente, como si cometiera un sacrilegio, se quitó la chaqueta y echó agua en la jofaina de la

mesilla-lavabo marrón oscuro. Todo aquello era penoso y absurdo, a menos que fuera un engranaje más de la cadena de pruebas a las que había que someterse; habría sido más sencillo si Elisabeth hubiera cerrado la puerta, pero seguro que no lo había hecho por delicadeza. Joachim se acordó de haber vivido ya esta situación, y entonces surgió con furor de castigo el recuerdo de una mesilla-lavabo bajo una lámpara de gas y una puerta cerrada: espantoso como recuerdo de Ruzena, no menos espantoso como problema de cómo enfocar la idea de lavarse en la vida en común con un ángel, ambas cosas una humillación para Elisabeth y una nueva prueba para él. Se lavó el rostro y las manos, con breves y silenciosos movimientos, para evitar el choque de la porcelana sobre el mármol; pero ahora se planteaba algo inconcebible: ¿quién podía atreverse a hacer gárgaras teniendo cerca a Elisabeth? Y, sin embargo, él tenía necesidad de sumergirse más profundamente en el límpido cristal, tenía que anegarse en el líquido elemento para renacer de esta purificación como del bautizo en el Jordán. Pero ¿de qué servía incluso un baño? Ruzena le había conocido bien y sacado sus consecuencias. Se sumergió de nuevo rápidamente en su guerrera, se la abrochó reglamentariamente y siguió paseando arriba y abajo. En la habitación contigua no se movía nada y él sintió que su presencia pesaba sobre Elisabeth. ¿Por qué no le gritaba, como había hecho Ruzena desde detrás de la puerta cerrada, que se fuera? En aquella ocasión, al menos, tenía a su lado a la mujer de los lavabos, pero ahora estaba solo, sin ayuda. Se había alejado demasiado pronto de Bertrand y de su ágil seguridad, y que él hubiera podido creer que debía proteger a Elisabeth de Bertrand le producía ahora la extraña sensación de un subterfugio. Le entró un terrible remordimiento: no era a ella a quien había querido proteger y salvar, sino su propia alma con el sacrificio de Elisabeth. ¿Estaría Elisabeth ahí dentro arrodillada, rogando a Dios que la liberara de las cadenas que había aceptado por compasión? ¿No debía decirle que le devolvía su libertad, ahora mismo, y que estaba dispuesto, si ella se lo ordenaba, a llevarla inmediatamente a su casa de Westend, a su hermosa casa que la esperaba? Lleno de zozobra, llamó a la puerta que comunicaba las dos habitaciones y se arrepintió inmediatamente de haberlo hecho. Elisabeth dijo en voz baja: «Joachim», y él hizo girar el pomo de la puerta. La muchacha yacía en la cama y sobre la mesilla de noche ardía una vela. Joachim permaneció de pie en la puerta y, adoptando una postura ligeramente militar, dijo con voz ronca: «Elisabeth, solo quería decirte que te devuelvo tu libertad; es inadmisible que te sacrifiques por mí». Elisabeth no salía de su asombro, aunque la tranquilizó que él no se acercara con la actitud de un esposo enamorado.

—¿Crees que me he sacrificado, Joachim? —y sonrió levemente—. Te has dado cuenta un poco tarde, ¿no te parece?

—No es demasiado tarde todavía, y agradezco a Dios que no sea demasiado tarde. Hasta ahora no me había dado cuenta… ¿Te llevo a Westend?

Elisabeth no pudo contener la risa; ¡ahora en plena noche! ¡Vaya ojos pondría la gente de allá!

—¿Por qué no te acuestas, Joachim? Mañana podemos hablar de todo esto con tranquilidad. También tú debes de estar cansado.

—No estoy cansado —dijo Joachim como un chiquillo obstinado.

La vela iluminaba llameante el pálido rostro de Elisabeth, que yacía entre el pelo suelto esparcido sobre la blanca almohada. Un extremo de la almohada se alzaba en el aire como un perfil y proyectaba en la pared una sombra semejante al contorno de la nariz de Elisabeth.

—Por favor, Elisabeth, aplasta el extremo izquierdo de la almohada, arriba, junto a tu cabeza —dijo Joachim desde la puerta.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó Elisabeth extrañada, poniendo la mano sobre la almohada.

—Proyecta una sombra odiosa —dijo Joachim.

Pero entretanto se había levantado otro extremo de la almohada y dibujaba otra nariz en la pared. Joachim, molesto, quiso arreglarlo por sí mismo y dio un paso.

—Pero, Joachim, ¿qué es lo que tanto te molesta de la sombra? ¿Está bien así?

—La sombra de tu rostro sobre la pared forma algo así como el perfil de una cordillera —contestó Joachim.

—Pero eso no tiene importancia.

—No me gusta.

Elisabeth temió que eso supusiera que había llegado el momento de apagar la vela, pero, con agradable sorpresa por su parte, Joachim dijo:

—Habría que poner dos velas a tu lado; entonces no habría sombras y parecerías Blancanieves.

Y, efectivamente, fue a su habitación y regresó con una segunda vela encendida. Elisabeth no pudo evitar un comentario:

—Eres divertido, Joachim. ¿Y dónde vas a poner la otra vela? En la pared no puedes. Además, entre las dos velas pareceré un cadáver.

Joachim estudió la situación; Elisabeth tenía razón; y dijo:

—¿Puedo colocar la vela sobre la mesilla?

—Claro que puedes… —Calló un instante y luego dijo en tono indeciso aunque alegre—: Ahora eres mi marido.

Joachim protegió la llama con la mano y llevó la vela a la mesilla, contempló pensativo las dos luces y, al acordarse de su boda sin luminarias, dijo: «Tres darían más solemnidad», como si con ello pudiera ofrecer a Elisabeth y a sus padres una compensación por la modestia de la ceremonia de bodas. También ella contemplaba las dos velas; se había subido el cobertor hasta los hombros, y solo la mano, con un puño de encaje en la muñeca, colgaba blandamente al borde de la cama. Joachim seguía pensando en la sencilla ceremonia, pero esta mano la había retenido él entre las suyas en el coche. Se sentía más tranquilo y casi había olvidado por qué había entrado allí. Ahora lo recordó y se sintió obligado a repetir su ofrecimiento.

—¿No quieres, pues, irte a la casa de Westend, Elisabeth?

—Estás loco, Joachim, ¡cómo voy a levantarme ahora! Me encuentro aquí estupendamente y tú quieres echarme.

Joachim, indeciso y perplejo, seguía de pie junto a la mesilla de noche; de repente no comprendió cómo era posible que las cosas cambiasen tanto de textura y de uso; una cama era un simpático mueble para dormir, en casa de Ruzena era un lugar de deseo e indescriptible dulzura, y ahora era algo inaccesible, algo cuyos bordes no osaba ni rozar. La madera es madera, pero uno tampoco quiere tocar la madera de un ataúd. «Es tan difícil, Elisabeth», dijo él de pronto, «perdóname.» Pero no le pedía perdón solamente, como tal vez ella podía suponer, por haberla querido hacer levantar a una hora tan intempestiva, sino por haberla comparado otra vez con Ruzena y por haber casi deseado —se percató de ello con espanto— que estuviera allí Ruzena y no Elisabeth. Se dio cuenta de cuán profundamente estaba aún hundido en el lodo. «Perdóname», repitió, y se arrodilló para besar, a guisa de despedida, aquella mano blanca surcada de venas azules que pendía del lecho. Ella no sabía si este gesto significaba el temido acercamiento y calló. La boca de Joachim oprimía su mano y él percibía sus propios dientes, presionándole la parte interior de los labios, como borde del duro cráneo que se escondía en su cabeza y que se continuaba por todo el esqueleto. Percibía también el cálido aliento en la cavidad de su boca, y la lengua agazapada en el hueco del maxilar inferior, y comprendió que debía alejar todo esto cuanto antes, a fin de que Elisabeth no lo notara. Pero él no quería conceder a Ruzena esta rápida victoria, y se mantuvo silencioso de rodillas junto a la cama, hasta que Elisabeth, como invitándole a despedirse, le apretó ligeramente la mano. Tal vez interpretó mal, intencionadamente, este gesto, ya que, lejanamente, le recordó las acariciadoras manos de Ruzena; no soltó la mano de Elisabeth, pese a que, en realidad, estaba impaciente por marcharse. Esperaba el milagro, la señal de la gracia que Dios debía otorgarle, y fue como si el miedo se irguiera ante la puerta de la gracia. Imploró: «Elisabeth, di algo», y Elisabeth respondió lentamente, como si no fueran sus propias palabras: «No somos lo bastante extraños ni lo bastante íntimos». Joachim dijo: «Elisabeth, ¿me abandonarás?». Elisabeth contestó con suavidad: «No, Joachim, creo realmente que proseguiremos juntos nuestro camino. No estés triste, todo irá bien». Estas habían sido las palabras de Bertrand, quiso replicar Joachim, pero quedó cortado, no solo porque hubiera sido inoportuno citar aquello ahora, sino porque las palabras de Bertrand en boca de Elisabeth le parecieron un signo mefistofélico del demonio y del mal, en lugar de la señal de Dios que él había implorado, pedido y esperado. Durante unos segundos se hizo visible la imagen de Bertrand en el fondo de la cajita marrón, y desapareció luego para dar paso al maligno, cuyo rostro y figura proyectaron sobre la pared el perfil de una cordillera. Y aunque sucedió sin apenas movimiento, apareciendo y desapareciendo de un modo estático y como obedeciendo a un campanilleo, era, sin embargo, una amonestación, una advertencia de que el mal no había sido vencido todavía y de que incluso Elisabeth estaba todavía en poder del maligno, puesto que lo había invocado con sus palabras y no había podido borrar ni los fantasmas ni el aquelarre con la palabra de Dios. Resultaba decepcionante, pero al mismo tiempo tranquilizador, y sintió ternura por las criaturas humanas y su debilidad. Elisabeth es la meta en lo celestial, pero el camino terrenal que conduce a esta meta tiene que encontrarlo y prepararlo él solo para los dos, pese a su gran debilidad, pero ¿dónde está el indicador que señala este conocimiento de la soledad? ¿Dónde se encuentra la ayuda? Se le ocurrió una sentencia de Clausewitz, según la cual únicamente se actúa presintiendo y sintiendo la verdad, y su corazón le hizo intuir que un matrimonio cristiano sería para ellos la ayuda redentora de la gracia, que les protegería a fin de que no tuvieran que vagar por la tierra ignorantes, absurdos y desamparados, ni tuvieran que sumergirse en la nada. No, no se podía llamar a esto convencionalismo del sentimiento. Se irguió y pasó la mano suavemente por el cobertor de seda, bajo el cual estaba el cuerpo de Elisabeth; se sentía casi como un enfermero, y, lejanamente, le parecía acariciar a su padre enfermo o a su mensajero. «Pobre pequeña Elisabeth», dijo, y eran las primeras palabras cariñosas que se atrevía a pronunciar. Ella, con la mano que le había quedado libre, empezó a acariciarle el cabello. Ruzena también lo hacía, pensó Joachim. Pero Elisabeth dijo en voz baja: «Joachim, todavía no somos lo suficientemente íntimos». El se había acercado un poco y, sentado al borde de la cama, le acariciaba la cabeza. Después se apoyó en el codo y contempló el rostro que, todavía pálido y extraño, yacía sobre la almohada, un rostro que no era de mujer, un rostro que no era el de su mujer, y ocurrió que,

lentamente y sin darse apenas cuenta, se encontró acostado a su lado. Ella se apartó ligeramente y la mano con encajes en la muñeca, única parte, además de la cabeza, que emergía aún de las sábanas, descansó en la de él. La guerrera de Joachim, debido a la postura, se había desordenado un poco; los faldones dejaban entrever el pantalón negro y, cuando Joachim lo notó, lo arregló rápidamente cubriéndolo de nuevo. Para no rozar con sus botas la ropa de la cama, encogió un poco las piernas y apoyó los pies algo forzadamente en la silla que se hallaba junto al lecho. La llama de las velas oscilaba; primero se apagó una, luego la otra. Se oían pasos apagados por las alfombras de los pasillos, aquí o allá se cerraba o abría alguna puerta, se percibía de lejos el murmullo de la gran ciudad, cuyo enorme tráfico ni siquiera de noche callaba del todo. Yacían juntos en silencio y miraban el techo de la habitación, donde se dibujaban unas líneas amarillentas que procedían de las rendijas de las persianas: parecían el tórax de un esqueleto. Después Joachim se durmió y, cuando Elisabeth se dio cuenta, no pudo evitar una sonrisa. Y después ella se durmió también.

IV

A pesar de todo, al cabo de dieciocho meses tuvieron su primer hijo. Sucedió, pues. Cómo pudo llegar a ocurrir, no es necesario relatarlo. El lector, con todo el material que se le ha proporcionado acerca de la configuración de los personajes, puede imaginárselo por sí mismo.

EL AUTOR Y SU OBRA

Hermann Broch (1886-1951) nació en Viena en una familia acomodada de origen judío. Cursó estudios de ingeniería textil y trabajó largo tiempo en la fábrica de su padre. En 1928 abandonó sus actividades en la industria para dedicarse por entero a la literatura y a sus estudios de filosofía, matemáticas y psicología. Perseguido por la Gestapo en 1938, logró salir de la cárcel gracias a la intervención de algunas personalidades, entre ellas James Joyce, y huir primero a Inglaterra y luego a Estados Unidos, donde falleció en la ciudad de New Haven. Aparte de una importante obra como ensayista, en el campo de la narrativa dejó varias obras capitales para la literatura contemporánea: *La muerte de Virgilio, Los inocentes* y la trilogía de Los sonámbulos, que, escrita entre 1931 y 1932, incluye *Pasenow o el romanticismo, Esch o la anarquía* y *Huguenau o el realismo*.

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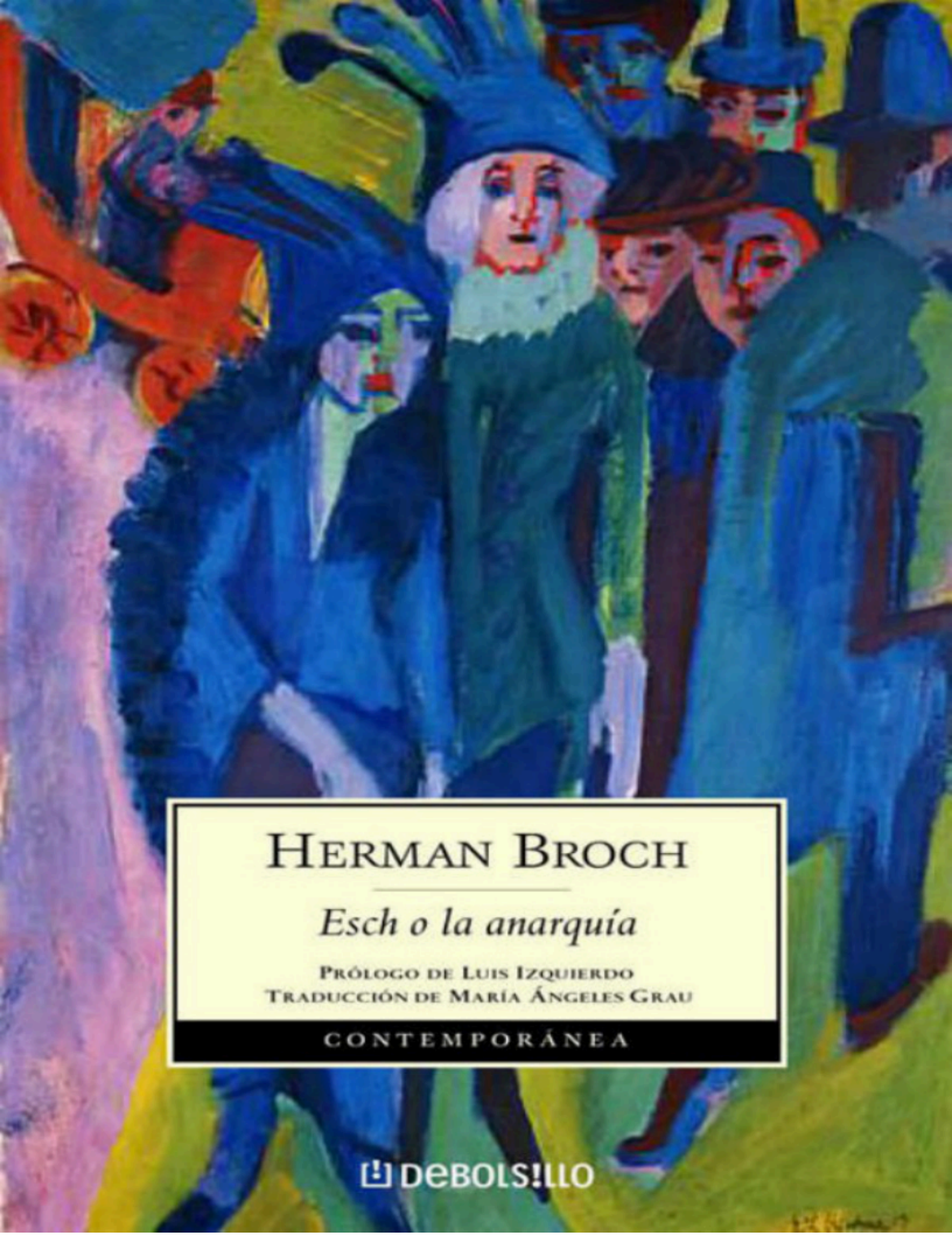
EL AUTOR Y SU OBRA



HERMAN BROCH

Esch o la anarquía

PRÓLOGO DE LUIS IZQUIERDO
TRADUCCIÓN DE MARÍA ÁNGELES GRAU

CONTEMPORÁNEA

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Esch o la anarquía

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Acerca de *Los sonámbulos*

HERMANN BROCH O EL PACIFISTA IRÓNICO

Como una piel contraída por la invasión súbita del frío exterior ante el sobresalto interior, Viena despertó estremecida —pero crepuscularmente lúcida— ante el impacto atronador, y gaseado, de la Primera Guerra europea. El siglo XX iniciaba en su caso el paradigma del principio y el fin de una era que en su espacio urbano e intelectual materializaba las líneas de T. S. Eliot: *«In my Beginnig is my End, in my End is my Beginning»*.

Viena había capitalizado la ensoñación patricia europea, concentrada en el ámbito centroriental del Viejo Continente: once nacionalidades, etnias variadas y confesiones religiosas de difícil o quimérica convivencia. Bajo el imperio, o la inercia latente de un poder con la sola fuerza de su declive, la armonía de un mundo con tres ciudades imperiales (Praga y Budapest además de las que asumía una titularidad hipotecada) no era sino el presentimiento de su desintegración.

Roto, o transformado si se prefiere, el mundo no era ya el mítico y paterno-familiar del nombre de Francisco José —sesenta y ocho años de mando, con bastón, y no de mando los últimos—; las nuevas realidades iban a imponerse. Para el vienés, esa figura que concentra avances científicos, preocupación minuciosa por el lenguaje y conciencia de la crisis que en los cambios mismos de su espacio se manifiesta, el latido de la alarma supone un llamamiento irrenunciable a la reflexión.

Las ambiciones de poder y sus resabios iban a redibujar con sus tropelías, o a restablecer con sus reivindicaciones, un mapa que seguiría quebrando y recosiendo a lo largo del siglo XX las costuras de unas fronteras tan lábiles como lo requirieran la tensión y el tesón —o el empecinamiento— de sus identidades.

Hermann Broch —un «autor a pesar suyo» (*Dichter wider Willen*), como lo definió su amiga Hannah Arendt — vivió práctica y literariamente como ingeniero y hombre de empresa hasta pasar a su vocación artística, el clima humanístico de Viena, pero también la vanidad de sus varias correcciones oficiales, el exceso de ornamentación como disfraz de su vacío. En su ensayo sobre «Hofmannsthal y su tiempo» (incluido en *Poesía e investigación*, Barcelona, Barral, 1974), traza un diagnóstico preciso y elocuente al respecto. El sentido crítico que revelan las páginas en torno al gran poeta y su ciudad, escritas hacia el final de su vida en Estados Unidos, presidía ya las líneas de su trilogía *Los sonámbulos*. De 1888 a 1918, y al frágil amparo del Romanticismo, sitúa en la Prusia finisecular, y en las conflictivas zonas industriales de Alemania, el teatro de unas circunstancias y personajes representativos de un común escenario germánico. No descuida algún paraíso provisional contemplativo, y aun abismático, para mostrar el lado de sombra que gravita en sus desapoderados protagonistas, y les confiere un relieve superior que ellos mismos ignoran.

La especulación a propósito de paisajes mentales (que parecen ávidos de hablar al alma) y el registro de las realidades de un capitalismo sin contemplaciones, con progresos tan evidentes como sus crímenes, conforman esta trilogía. Hermann Broch, vienés, sensible, auscultador de los vientos del espíritu, dialoga narrativamente con el lector, y lo sitúa en una Alemania predominante y aglutinadora que por su experiencia empresarial conocía bien. *Los sonámbulos* conforman una reflexión ejemplar para comprender, más allá de las geografías estrictas del texto, el devenir de una Europa que, después de 1945 —con Dachau y Auschwitz y Coventry y Dresde— parece, sobre todo, una promesa incumplida.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO
Barcelona, Sant Vicenç de Montalt,
marzo de 2006

Prólogo

ESCH, O LA INSATISFACCIÓN DEL VACÍO

Esch o la anarquía, segunda parte de la trilogía *Los sonámbulos*, enlaza con la anterior, *Pasenow o el romanticismo*, pero acentúa la dimensión conflictiva de sus protagonistas, situados entre la ensoñación y la vigilia. Más que el argumento, al autor le interesa ahora extraer de las conciencias su indeterminación, tensa entre frustraciones y momentos exultantes. El choque entre estados contrapuestos, entre el ideal y las resistencias y condicionamientos de lo real, origina la característica inestabilidad y ambigüedad psicológica del sonambulismo anárquico que culmina en *Esch*.

Los hilos temáticos de la novela —aristocracia territorial y mundo urbano enfrentados, supervivencias precarias de clase y modos de vida en trance de extinción, emergencia de nuevas realidades— se trenzan a partir de la interacción entre unos personajes principales que, como entidades psíquicas, son reveladores de ideas y humores en conflicto con el paso del tiempo. Tienden por tanto a la abstracción, pues vienen a representar estructuras mentales, y requieren del lector el esfuerzo del conocimiento. La operación de leer una novela deja de ser, pues, para Broch un entretenimiento para convertirse en algo más, un deseo de renovación en el que trabajan, durante el primer tercio del siglo XX autores como Thomas Mann, Joyce, Kafka o Musil, quien consideraba que las páginas de Broch, aunque distintas por su técnica y, sobre todo, opuestas estilísticamente, presentaban ciertas «intenciones que coinciden parcialmente con las mías».[1] En rigor, ambos autores combinan pensamiento y narración para articular un discurso experimental y renovador que haga de la novela una experiencia intelectual reflexiva y exigente para el lector. Más austera y ensayística en Musil, en Broch se decanta hacia la exploración del fenómeno religioso y el lirismo radical en muchos fragmentos.

A diferencia de Musil, que enfoca esta etapa desde la Viena finisecular del XIX en *El hombre sin atributos*, Broch traslada a Alemania sus *sonámbulos*, pues allí resultan más evidentes los cambios económicos y los conflictos del mundo germánico. En *Esch o la anarquía*, el escenario ha cambiado. De la Prusia oriental de la primera parte, aristocrática y refractaria a la realidad, la acción se desplaza al medio urbano industrial de Colonia y Mannheim. Esch, el protagonista, se debate entre un purismo teórico —sublimado en los números como si se tratara de llevar un libro de cuentas teológico— y la entrega a una sexualidad impulsiva y copiosa. Despedido sin razón, centra sus ansias justicieras en Eduard von Bertrand, su jefe y capitán de industria en esta segunda entrega. Alimenta obsesiones aberrantes como la de redimir a Ilona o emprender negocios relacionados con el vino y el espectáculo, mientras no cesa de elucubrar quimeras y soñar con América como alternativa a su anodino transcurrir. Pero no son más que compensaciones provisionales para descargar sus presuntas energías. Acude habitualmente a la taberna de mamá Hentjen, a la que seduce o más bien reduce hasta su unión conyugal o comercial, pues los dos ámbitos vienen a resultar lo mismo. Las descripciones, a menudo de tintes caricaturescos, muestran a Esch como un pobre pequeño burgués que procura resarcirse de su precariedad de horizontes con proyectos imaginarios y, entre ellos, el más delirante de acabar con Bertrand.

Entre la sucesión de anécdotas que pueblan las páginas de esta novela, Broch deja entrever ciertos signos del ambiente de la época, como la sublimación de diversos personajes en un objeto fetiche al que trasladan la imposibilidad de realizarse, tendencia hacia la que el autor dirige su mirada crítica. Es el caso de la foto que la tabernera guarda de su marido, tal vez como exvoto de póstuma devoción, o la torre Eiffel, mito o monumento industrial en el paso hacia el siglo XX. Y sobre todo, la imagen de la estatua de la libertad vista en un libro que Esch regala a mamá Hentjen, que representa la fijación ya apuntada del viaje a América.

Gran parte de la novela prolonga la andadura de la primera parte. Pero la exploración psicológica de los Pasenow, padre e hijo, deviene ahora una exploración radical de la conciencia. En el «viaje soñado» (*Traumreise*) de Esch a la villa de Eduard von Bertrand —que aparece en el segundo de los tres apartados precedidos de breves excursos ensayísticos—, la novela ausculta el flujo existencial de los personajes principales, como si procediera a calar en el interior de unas vidas sumidas en la extrañeza recíproca de una paradójica complementariedad. En dicho momento crucial, Bertrand —causante de todos sus males según Esch— deshace la casuística reivindicativa de este con la transrealidad mental de sus palabras. El sentido del texto se abisma aquí en un desencuentro crepuscular que configura dos actitudes vitales. Frente a quien ve más allá de lo inmediato y afina el juicio por saberse vulnerable, Esch confunde la justicia con la contabilidad, o con su ajuste de cuentas personal, y cree que solo así volverá el mundo a la debida corrección. Asimismo, el episodio prefigura la precaria y supuesta evasión a Badenweiler, un espacio estético y una distancia irreal. Ahí, el paisaje y el discurso de Bertrand fundidos conforman la atmósfera de voz interior que contrasta con el tono psicológico tenso, pero convencional, usado anteriormente. Sus comentarios se refieren a ese vivir a

tientas irreconocido, que desentraña en tres aspectos:

El primero, religioso, alude a que «los que han de morir ... dejan sitio al redentor, al conocedor de todo, el portador del amor. Y solo su muerte en sacrificio liberará al mundo, retornándolo al estado de la nueva conciencia ... Pero antes tiene que venir el Anticristo, el insensato, el sin sueños. Primero hay que dejar el mundo sin aire, vaciado como si se pusiera bajo una campana neumática... la nada».

El segundo se centra en la incomunicación de dos itinerarios paralelos que no pueden llegar a encontrarse: «Tú sabes que yo no puedo retenerte, por más que temas la soledad. También yo me he de limitar a proseguir mis negocios». Esch y Bertrand suponen la conjunción imposible de polos opuestos que se acechan, inconciliables.

Y a modo de conclusión que trasciende y enlaza lo universal y lo particular, Bertrand concluye: «Y aunque caminemos juntos, no nos oímos y nos olvidamos los unos de los otros, como tú también, mi querido y último amigo, olvidarás lo que te estoy diciendo, lo olvidarás como se olvida un sueño».

Al hilo de estos comentarios, la figura de Bertrand[2] —de relieve bien definido en *Pasenow* y aquí compulsivamente suscitada desde la mente de Esch— cobra una significación determinante en la economía del texto. Por su reiteración explícita o latente, delinea los motivos rectores de la exploración crítica brochiana: la compartimentación intransitiva de las conductas y su evasión a espacios oníricos cuya irrealidad compense siquiera la falta de sustancia. Una vez más, el desenmascaramiento del «doblestar» del sonámbulo acentúa la inanidad de sus rituales, contemporáneos a la llegada de un progreso en el que lo material va arrasando ciertos núcleos de valor periclitados.

Bertrand recapitula con sus palabras la corriente de fondo de la trilogía y adivina en los otros —de Elizabeth y Joachim von Pasenow a Esch— una vulnerabilidad que se refugia, bien sea en la obediencia al clan y el uniforme militar, bien en una indeterminación que transfiere a otros las propias carencias. Que el mundo resulte a juicio del contable un lugar legitimado gracias al suicidio de Bertrand —a quien odia por su éxito como empresario y, además, rechaza por homosexual— revela una diseminada miseria común, que en su caso agrava prejuicios y le expone a tentaciones doctrinarias. Lamentable evolución que se recrudecerá en la tercera parte.

El breve capítulo final de la novela es un guiño al lector, sujeto complementario implícito en sus páginas. Ofrece una imagen paródica del matrimonio Esch–mamá Hentjen. El contable dilapida la fortuna de su cónyuge, vuelve a su primer empleo, y —nos asegura el autor— la pareja se ama. Los golpes a mamá Hentjen parecen desmentirlo, pero ciertamente disminuyen hasta su total desaparición. Las últimas páginas anticipan cierta radicalidad ensayística que se acentuará en *Huguenau o el realismo*, la tercera y última novela de la trilogía. Para las reflexiones a que obliga, intensificadas por la combinación de distintas estrategias y géneros, sirvan de muestra estas líneas:

> La plenitud jamás tiene lugar en lo real, pero el camino del anhelo y de la libertad es infinito y nunca podrá ser hollado, es estrecho y tortuoso como el del sonámbulo, aunque se trate del camino que conduce a los brazos abiertos de la patria y de su pecho viviente.

Esta líneas anticipan el mundo de Huguenau, revelador de una primera liquidación de Europa. De lo que hacia 1903 cabía imaginar, a partir de los hechos y atendiendo a los presagios, Hermann Broch ofrece un reflexión imprescindible para entender algunos de los dilemas fundamentales del siglo XX.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO

La plenitud, por tanto, jamás tiene lugar en lo real, pero el camino del anhelo y de la libertad es infinito y nunca podrá ser hollado, es estrecho y tortuoso como el del sonámbulo.

I

El 2 de marzo de 1903 fue un mal día para August Esch, empleado subalterno de comercio de treinta años de edad; había discutido con su jefe y fue despedido antes de tener ocasión de despedirse por sí mismo. Y le molestaba más no haber podido decir él la última palabra que el hecho en sí del despido. Teniendo en cuenta, además, lo mucho que habría podido espetarle en pleno rostro a aquel hombre que, en realidad, ignoraba cuanto ocurría en su propio negocio, que se fiaba de las insinuaciones de un Nentwig, sin caer en la cuenta de que el tal Nentwig se embolsaba unas comisiones en cuanto se presentaba la ocasión, y que mantenía seguramente adrede los ojos cerrados porque el tal Nentwig debía de tener conocimiento de algunos manejos sucios. ¡Y de qué modo tan tonto se había dejado atacar por sorpresa! Con malas palabras le habían reprochado un error en los libros, y ahora, al reflexionar sobre ello, veía que no existía tal error. Pero los dos se habían gritado con tal furia que todo acabó en una discusión absurda, en el transcurso de la cual se encontró de pronto despedido. Naturalmente en aquel momento solo se le había ocurrido la conocida réplica de Götz von Berlichingen, mientras que ahora le venían a la mente toda suerte de respuestas oportunas. «Señor», eso es, «Señor», hubiera debido decir, y al mismo tiempo hubiera tenido que mirarle con todo desprecio; y ahora Esch lo dijo, en tono sarcástico: «Señor, ¿tiene usted una ligera idea de lo que ocurre en su negocio…?»; sí, en esta forma habría tenido que hablar, pero ahora era demasiado tarde. Después se había emborrachado y se había acostado con una chica, pero no había servido de nada; la rabia le duraba todavía y Esch seguía despotricando en su interior, mientras se dirigía a la ciudad por la orilla del Rin.

Oyó pasos tras él y, al volverse, vio a Martin, que se acercaba a toda prisa entre las dos muletas, apoyando en la madera la punta del pie de su pierna más corta. Solo le faltaba aquel tipo pisándole los talones. Esch habría continuado gustosamente su camino, aun a riesgo de recibir un muletazo en la cabeza —tenía bien merecido que le dieran de palos—, pero le pareció que era una mala jugada dejar que el lisiado corriera tras él, y se detuvo. Por otra parte tenía que preocuparse de buscar otro empleo, y Martin, que conocía a tanta gente, tal vez pudiera encontrarle algo. El tullido se acercó, dejó su pierna lisiada bamboleándose y dijo sin preámbulos:

—¿Despedido?

O sea que este ya lo sabía.

—Despedido —replicó Esch con acritud.

—¿Te queda dinero?

Esch se encogió de hombros; le alcanzaría para un par de días. Martin reflexionó.

—Creo que tengo un empleo para ti.

—Bien, pero de meterme en tu organización ni hablar.

—Lo sé, lo sé, te crees superior… Pero ya llegará. ¿Dónde vamos?

Esch no tenía una meta fija; y fueron a la taberna de mamá Hentjen. En la Kastellgasse Martin se detuvo:

—¿Te han dado un certificado decente?

—Tendré que ir a buscarlo.

—En la Mittelrheinische de Mannheim necesitan un contable para barcos o algo parecido… Siempre que no te importe irte de Colonia.

Entraron. Era un local bastante grande y oscuro, una taberna que de seguro frecuentaban los marineros del Rin desde hacía cientos de años; claro que, aparte de la bóveda ennegrecida por el humo, no quedaba nada de su largo pasado. Las paredes en torno a las mesas estaban recubiertas hasta media altura de madera marrón y un banco de obra corría a lo largo del muro. En la repisa había jarras de cerveza de Munich, y también podía verse una torre Eiffel de bronce. La torre Eiffel ostentaba una bandera negra-blanca-roja, y, si se miraba con más atención, se podían descifrar las letras doradas y desdibujadas de las palabras «Mesa reservada a los clientes». Entre las dos ventanas había una pianola con las tapas abiertas y se podía ver el cilindro de notas y el mecanismo interior. En realidad hubiera debido estar cerrada, y el que quisiera disfrutar de la música hubiera tenido que echar una moneda. Pero mamá Hentjen no era tacaña, y al cliente le bastaba meter las manos en el mecanismo y tirar de la palanca; todos los clientes de mamá Hentjen sabían cómo funcionaba el aparato. Frente a la pianola, toda la parte estrecha del fondo del local estaba ocupada por el mostrador, y detrás del mostrador había un gran espejo entre dos vitrinas llenas de multicolores botellas de licor. Cuando por la noche mamá Hentjen ocupaba su sitio en el mostrador, solía volverse, y, mirándose al espejo, retocaba con la mano aquel peinado que, como un rígido pan de azúcar, cubría de cabellos rubios su cráneo redondo y macizo. En el mostrador había algunas botellas grandes de vino y aguardiente. Porque los licores de distintos colores que llenaban las vitrinas eran raramente solicitados. Por último, entre el mostrador y una de las vitrinas, se hallaba, discretamente colocada, una jofaina de cinc con un grifo.

El local carecía de calefacción y su frío era maloliente. Los dos hombres se frotaron las manos y, mientras Esch se dejaba caer pesadamente en un banco, Martin manipuló en la pianola, que emitió roncamente en el helado ambiente las notas de la marcha de los gladiadores. Pese al ruido, se oyeron pronto pasos en una chirriante escalera de madera, y la puerta de vaivén situada junto al mostrador se abrió empujada por mamá Hentjen. Llevaba todavía el atuendo matinal de trabajo; se había atado un gran delantal de algodón azul por encima de la falda y no se había puesto todavía el corsé que usaba por las tardes, con lo que sus pechos colgaban como sacos dentro de la blusa de fustán a cuadros. Solo el peinado se mantenía erguido, como un rígido y correcto pan de azúcar, sobre el pálido rostro inexpresivo, cuya edad era muy difícil de precisar. Pero todo el mundo sabía que la señora Gertrud Hentjen contaba treinta y seis años de edad y era desde hacía mucho, mucho tiempo —habían calculado recientemente que debían de haber pasado catorce años— viuda del señor Hentjen, cuya amarillenta fotografía colgaba encima de la torre Eiffel, entre la licencia del establecimiento y un paisaje lunar, los tres con hermosos marcos negros cuajados de adornos dorados. Y a pesar de que el señor Hentjen, con aquella barba de chivo, parecía un infeliz aprendiz de sastre, su viuda le guardaba fidelidad; por lo menos no se podía decir nada de ella; y, caso de que alguno se atreviera a acercársele con miras matrimoniales, ella replicaba en tono desdeñoso: «Sí, claro, la taberna le vendría muy bien. Pero prefiero administrarla yo solita».

—Buenas, señor Geyring, buenas, señor Esch —dijo mamá Hentjen—. Hoy vienen ustedes muy pronto.

—Hace ya bastantes horas que estamos en pie, mamá Hentjen —repuso Martin—. El que trabaja quiere también comer.

Martin pidió queso y vino; Esch, que notaba todavía el vino de la noche anterior en la boca y en el estómago, pidió una copita de aguardiente. La señora Hentjen se sentó con ellos y quiso que le contaran las novedades. Esch hablaba con monosílabos y, aunque no se avergonzaba en absoluto de que le hubieran despedido, le molestaba que Geyring difundiera de esta forma el acontecimiento. «Sí, otra víctima del capitalismo», concluyó el sindicalista, «pero hay que reintegrarse al trabajo. Naturalmente, el señor barón, si quiere, puede permitirse el lujo de no dar golpe.» Pagó la cuenta y no permitió que Esch abonara su copa: «Hay que proteger a los parados…».

Cogió las muletas, que había dejado apoyadas a su lado, fijó la punta del pie izquierdo en la madera y salió del establecimiento tambaleándose entre los dos bastones.

Después de que él se hubo marchado, los otros dos permanecieron un rato en silencio; luego Esch señaló con el mentón hacia la puerta y dijo:

—Un anarquista.

La señora Hentjen encogió sus carnosos hombros:

—Y aunque lo sea, es un hombre honesto…

—Claro que es honesto —corroboró Esch.

Y la señora Hentjen prosiguió:

—… pero muy pronto le cogerán otra vez; ya en una ocasión le tuvieron encerrado seis meses. —Y añadió —: Claro que esto es asunto suyo.

Los dos callaron de nuevo. Esch reflexionaba sobre si Martin habría cojeado o no desde la infancia, un lisiado de nacimiento, se dijo, y en voz alta:

—A él le gustaría meterme en su asociación socialista. Pero yo no quiero.

—¿Por qué no? —preguntó la señora Hentjen sin interés.

—No va conmigo. Yo quiero llegar; si uno quiere llegar, tiene que haber orden.

La señora Hentjen tuvo que darle la razón:

—Es cierto, tiene que haber orden. Bueno, ahora tengo que ir a la cocina. ¿Comerá usted hoy aquí, señor Esch?

Esch lo mismo podía comer allí que en cualquier otra parte, pero, en definitiva, ¿por qué deambular con aquel viento helado?

—Aunque este año apenas nieva —dijo sorprendido por la comprobación—, el polvo de nieve le ciega a uno totalmente.

—Sí, fuera hace un tiempo pésimo —corroboró la señora Hentjen—. O sea que se queda usted aquí.

La mujer desapareció en la cocina; la puerta de vaivén osciló un buen rato aún, movimiento que Esch siguió apáticamente con la mirada hasta que la puerta se quedó quieta. Luego intentó dormir. Pero ahora sintió el frío del local; anduvo arriba y abajo, con paso un tanto duro y pesado, cogió el periódico que estaba sobre el mostrador, pero no pudo pasar las páginas de tan helados que tenía los dedos; también le dolían los ojos. Se decidió pues a buscar el calor de la cocina; entró con el periódico aún en la mano. «Quiere usted olisquear los pucheros, ¿no?», dijo la señora Hentjen, aunque al momento comprendió que hacía demasiado frío en el local, y, como tenía por costumbre no encender el fuego hasta después de comer, y se mantenía fiel a esta regla, le permitió que le hiciera compañía. Esch la observaba mientras ella trasteaba con las ollas, y le hubiera gustado cogerla por los pechos, pero la fama que ella tenía de ser inabordable hizo que este deseo muriera al nacer.

Cuando la muchacha que la ayudaba en la cocina salió un momento, Esch dijo:

—Esto de que usted quiera vivir tan sola…

—Vaya, conque ahora va a empezar usted también con esta canción.

—No —repuso Esch—, es solo un decir.

La señora Hentjen había adquirido una expresión extrañamente concentrada; era como si algo le diera asco, porque se sacudió haciendo oscilar sus senos y luego siguió trabajando con aquel semblante vacío y aburrido que todos conocían. Esch se puso a leer el periódico junto a la ventana; finalmente miró hacia el patio donde el viento levantaba pequeños torbellinos de polvo de nieve.

Más tarde llegaron las dos muchachas que por la noche hacían de camareras; venían sin lavar y medio dormidas. La señora Hentjen, las dos muchachas, la pequeña criada y Esch tomaron asiento alrededor de la mesa de la cocina y empezaron a comer, todos con los codos muy separados del cuerpo y las cabezas inclinadas sobre el plato.

Esch había preparado su ofrecimiento a los de Mannheim; solo faltaba adjuntar el certificado. En realidad estaba contento de que todo hubiera sucedido de aquel modo. No era bueno permanecer siempre en la misma colocación. Uno tenía que marcharse, cuanto más lejos mejor. Había que moverse; siempre se había mantenido fiel a este principio.

Por la tarde fue a la casa Stemberg & Cía., Vinos al por mayor y Bodegas, para recoger su certificado. Nentwig le hizo esperar ante la barrera de madera; gordo y fofo, echaba cuentas sentado en su escritorio. Esch golpeó impaciente la madera con las uñas. Nentwig se levantó, se acercó a la barrera y dijo mirándole desde lo alto:

—Paciencia, señor Esch. Ha venido por su certificado, claro. Pero no será tan urgente. Veamos. ¿Fecha de nacimiento? ¿Fecha de ingreso?

Esch, con la cabeza vuelta hacia otro lado, le dio estos datos, y Nentwig tomó nota. Después dictó algo y regresó con el certificado. Esch lo leyó:

—Esto no es un certificado —dijo, y devolvió el papel.

—¿Qué pasa?

—Tiene usted que certificar mi trabajo como contable.

—¡Usted, contable! Bastante ha demostrado lo que sabe hacer.

Había llegado el momento de ajustar cuentas:

—¡Creo que para sus inventarios necesitan ustedes un contable especializado!

Nentwig se desconcertó:

—¿Qué quiere usted decir?

—Quiero decir lo que digo.

Nentwig cambió de actitud y dijo casi amablemente:

—Con su agresividad únicamente consigue usted perjudicarse a sí mismo tiene un buen empleo y se disgusta con su jefe.

Esch se dio cuenta de su victoria y comenzó a explotarla:

—Con el jefe hablaré también.

—Por mí, puede usted hablar con el jefe tanto como quiera —dijo Nentwig arrogante—. Vamos a ver, ¿qué clase de certificado tiene que ser?

Esch exigió que el documento dijera: «celoso de su deber, de toda confianza, versado en todos los trabajos de contabilidad y oficina».

Nentwig quería deshacerse de él:

—No hay mucha verdad en todo esto, pero por mí…

Se volvió hacia el escribiente para dictarle la nueva versión.

Esch se había sentido ofendido:

—Así que no es verdad, ¿eh…? Entonces escriba usted, además, «muy recomendable desde todos los puntos de vista».

Nentwig hizo una reverencia:

—Lo que usted mande, señor Esch.

Esch leyó el nuevo escrito y se sintió satisfecho:

—Ahora la firma del jefe —dijo en tono imperioso.

A Nentwig esto le pareció ya demasiado, y gritó:

—¿Acaso la mía no le parece bien?

—Si usted tiene facultad para firmar, para mí es lo mismo —fue la generosa y ampulosa respuesta de Esch.

Y Nentwig firmó.

Esch salió a la calle y se dirigió al buzón más próximo. Silbaba; se sentía rehabilitado. Tenía el certificado; perfecto. Lo incluyó en el sobre que contenía su ofrecimiento a la Mittelrheinische. El hecho de que Nentwig

hubiera cedido demostraba que no tenía la conciencia tranquila. Los inventarios habían sido, pues, falseados, y era necesario entregar aquel sujeto a la policía. Sí, constituía un simple deber ciudadano el denunciarle de inmediato. La carta se había deslizado sorda y suavemente dentro del buzón, y Esch, con los dedos aún en la trampilla del mismo, se preguntó si debía ir directamente a la comisaría. Indeciso, dio algunos pasos. Había hecho mal al enviar el certificado, hubiera debido devolvérselo a Nentwig; sacarle primero un certificado e ir luego a denunciarle no era honesto. Pero ya estaba hecho, y sin certificado le habría resultado muy difícil obtener el puesto en la compañía naviera Mittelrheinische. No le quedaría otra alternativa que volver a la casa Stemberg. Y se figuró que tal vez el jefe le daría el puesto de Nentwig por haber descubierto la falsificación, ya que Nentwig debería permanecer un tiempo en la cárcel. Pero ¿y si el propio jefe estuviera involucrado en las cochinadas? En cualquier caso, entonces, la investigación policíaca daría al traste con todo el tinglado. Esto daría como resultado una casa en quiebra, pero no una plaza de contable. Y en los periódicos se hablaría de «la venganza de un empleado despedido». Y, en definitiva, él acabaría siendo sospechoso de complicidad. Y, para él, no habría ni certificado ni posibilidad de encontrar trabajo en ninguna parte. Esch se alegró de la agudeza con que sacaba conclusiones, pero estaba furioso. «Sucia pocilga de cerdos», dijo para sus adentros. Se había detenido en la explanada delante de la ópera, y echaba sus maldiciones al viento que le llenaba los ojos de nevisca helada. No sabía qué hacer. Finalmente decidió aplazar la cuestión; en caso de que no le dieran el empleo los de la Mittelrheinische, siempre habría tiempo de dejar actuar a Némesis. Con las manos en los bolsillos de su raída chaqueta, a través de la tarde que iba oscureciendo, se dirigió, en realidad para guardar las formas, a la comisaría de policía. Observó a los centinelas durante un rato. Cuando apareció un coche celular lleno de detenidos, esperó a que descendieran todos y, al ver que el empleado cerraba la puerta sin que Nentwig apareciera entre ellos, se sintió decepcionado. Permaneció allí todavía un momento y por fin dio la vuelta y se encaminó hacia el Mercado Viejo. Las dos arrugas que le cruzaban las mejillas tenían ahora un surco más profundo. «Borrachín, mala uva», pensó regañándose a sí mismo. Descontento y de mal humor, pese a la victoria que tan amarga le estaba resultando, tuvo que emborracharse otra vez y acostarse con una muchacha.

La señora Hentjen, con el traje de seda marrón que, de ordinario, no solía ponerse hasta la noche, había pasado la tarde en casa de una amiga, y al regresar la invadió de nuevo aquella oleada de cólera que acostumbraba a sentir al contemplar aquella casa y aquel local en los que se veía obligada a vivir desde hacía tanto tiempo. Desde luego, con aquel negocio tenía uno bastante bien guardadas las espaldas, y, cuando sus amigas la alababan o lisonjeaban por su capacidad, experimentaba una sensación de bienestar que arreglaba muchas cosas. Pero ¿por qué no tendría a su cargo una tienda de lencería o una corsetería o una peluquería de señoras, en lugar de tener que habérselas todas las noches con aquella partida de borrachos? De no llevar el corsé bien apretado, las náuseas habrían agitado su cuerpo a la vista de aquella casa: hasta tal punto odiaba a los hombres que la frecuentaban y a los que ella tenía que servir. Aunque tal vez odiaba todavía más a las mujeres, siempre tan tontas y siempre persiguiendo a los hombres. No, entre sus amigas no había ninguna de esas que se pirran por los hombres, que se mezclan con estos sujetos y los admiten junto a sí como las perras. El día anterior había descubierto a la criada en el patio con un muchacho, y todavía le escocía agradablemente la mano con que le había dado de bofetadas: tenía ganas de emprenderla otra vez con la muchacha. Sí, las mujeres eran, quizá, más repugnantes aún que los hombres. Ella prefería a sus camareras o a las mujerzuelas que despreciaban a los hombres cuando tenían que acostarse con ellos: le gustaba hablar con estas mujeres largo y tendido, le gustaba que le contasen sus cosas, las consolaba y mimaba a fin de reparar sus sufrimientos. Por esta razón los empleos en la taberna de mamá Hentjen estaban muy solicitados, y las chicas los consideraban como algo codiciable que querían conservar a toda costa. Y mamá Hentjen se alegraba de que le tuvieran este apego y este afecto.

Arriba, en el primer piso, estaba su hermosa habitación: enorme, abarcaba con sus tres ventanas que daban a la calleja todo el ancho de la casa sobre la taberna y el vestíbulo; en el fondo, donde abajo se encontraba el mostrador, el cuarto formaba una especie de alcoba, protegida por una cortina de colores claros. Si se corría la cortina, una vez acostumbrados los ojos a la oscuridad, podían verse las camas de matrimonio. Pero la señora Hentjen no usaba este cuarto y nadie sabía si se había usado alguna vez. A una habitación tan grande es muy complicado y costoso dotarla de buena calefacción, y por eso era muy comprensible que la señora Hentjen hubiera elegido como sala de estar y dormitorio la pequeña habitación situada sobre la cocina y que usara la sala oscura y fría para guardar mercancías fácilmente corrompibles. Incluso las nueces que la señora Hentjen solía adquirir en otoño habían sido llevadas allá y yacían en gruesa capa sobre el suelo, cruzado por dos anchas franjas de linóleo verde.

La señora Hentjen, todavía de mal humor, subió a la habitación a buscar salchichas para la noche y, como el ser humano cuando está iracundo se distrae fácilmente, tropezó con las nueces, que rodaron con un ruido irritante ante sus pies. Cuando, además, pisó una, su ira aumentó y, mientras la recogía, a fin de remediar la pérdida, e iba separando cuidadosamente la cáscara rota de la nuez y se llevaba a la boca los pedacitos

blancos recubiertos de amarga piel amarillenta, iba dando gritos para que acudiera la muchacha de la cocina; finalmente aquella pécora la oyó y subió atropelladamente la escalera, para ser recibida por un desordenado aluvión de insultos: naturalmente el tener trato con muchachos iba unido a robar nueces —las nueces hubieran tenido que estar junto a la ventana y resulta que uno tropezaba con ellas justo al franquear la puerta; las nueces no se trasladan por propia iniciativa desde la ventana. Cuando se disponía a levantarle la mano y la chica se protegía ya con el brazo, la señora Hentjen notó una piel de nuez en la boca y se limitó a escupir despectivamente; luego bajó al local, seguida de la llorosa muchacha.

En cuanto entró en la taberna, donde flotaban ya espesas nubes de humo de tabaco, experimentó, como casi todos los días, aquella sensación de angustia casi incomprensible pero difícil de dominar. Se dirigió al espejo y retocó maquinalmente el rubio pan de azúcar que cubría su cabeza, se alisó el vestido y no recobró la calma hasta cerciorarse de que su aspecto era excelente. Contempló ahora los conocidos rostros entre los clientes y, aunque obtenía más ganancias con las bebidas que con las comidas, sentía más simpatía por los comedores que por los bebedores. Salió de detrás del mostrador y pasó por entre las mesas preguntando si todos estaban bien atendidos. Y, cuando un cliente pedía otra ración, llamaba con cierta satisfacción a la camarera. Realmente la cocina de mamá Hentjen era algo que valía la pena.

Geyring ya estaba allí; sus muletas permanecían apoyadas junto a él; había cortado la carne que tenía en el plato en pedacitos y comía mecánicamente, al tiempo que sostenía con la mano izquierda uno de aquellos periódicos socialistas que siempre asomaban por sus bolsillos. A la señora Hentjen le gustaba Geyring, en parte porque, al ser un lisiado, no era un hombre completo, en parte porque no acudía a la taberna a emborracharse, ni a armar jaleo, ni a causa de las chicas, sino porque sencillamente su trabajo le exigía permanecer en contacto con los navegantes y trabajadores del puerto. Y, sobre todo, a ella le gustaba porque todas las noches cenaba en su taberna y siempre alababa su cocina. Se sentó a su lado.

—¿Ha estado Esch aquí? —preguntó Geyring—. Ha conseguido el empleo en la Mittelrheinische. El lunes empezará.

—Lo ha conseguido gracias a usted, señor Geyring —dijo la señora Hentjen.

—No, mamá Hentjen, todavía no hemos llegado a que la organización pueda proporcionar empleos… Falta mucho para esto… Pero ya llegará. Yo únicamente puse a Esch sobre la pista. ¿Por qué no se ha de ayudar a un muchacho de su valía aunque no sea de los nuestros?

Mamá Hentjen no se mostró muy interesada:

—Bueno, coma usted a gusto, señor Geyring, voy a traerle algo extra como obsequio mío.

Fue al mostrador y regresó con un plato que contenía una rodaja no muy grande de embutido, adornada con unas hojitas de perejil. El arrugado rostro de Geyring, rostro de un niño de cuarenta años, le sonrió agradecido con sus feos dientes, y él puso su mano sobre la de ella, blanca y carnosa, mano que ella retiró de inmediato un poco sorprendida.

Al cabo de un rato llegó Esch. Geyring levantó la mirada del periódico y le dijo:

—Enhorabuena, August.

—Gracias —contestó Esch—. O sea que ya lo sabes. Ha ido todo sobre ruedas, contestaron a vuelta de correo y me dieron el empleo. Muchas gracias por haberme dado la idea.

Pero su expresión, bajo aquel pelo oscuro y corto como un cepillo, reflejaba el estado de ánimo vacío y envarado propio del hombre descontento.

—Lo he hecho con sumo gusto —dijo Martin; luego se volvió hacia el mostrador y alzando la voz añadió—: Aquí tenemos a nuestro nuevo pagador.

—Buena suerte, señor Esch —dijo secamente la señora Hentjen, si bien salió de detrás del mostrador para tenderle la mano.

Esch, que quería demostrar que no todo el mérito era de Martin, sacó su certificado del bolsillo:

—No habría sido tan sencillo, si Stemberg no hubiera tenido que darme un certificado tan bueno.

Subrayó el «hubiera tenido» con intención, y añadió «esa compañía de cerdos». La señora Hentjen leyó el informe con aire distraído y dijo:

—Es un informe estupendo.

Geyring también lo leyó y corroboró:

—Sí, la Mittelrheinische puede estar satisfecha de haber reclutado un elemento de primera clase… Ahora tendré que decirle al presidente Bertrand que me pague una comisión por este servicio.

—Un contable perfecto, ¿verdad?, perfecto —se vanaglorió Esch.

—Es bonito poder decir esto de uno mismo —dijo la señora Hentjen—. Ahora está usted naturalmente muy orgulloso, señor Esch, y tiene sobrados motivos para ello. ¿Quiere comer algo?

Claro que quería, y, mientras la señora Hentjen le contemplaba complacida viendo que le gustaba la comida, él explicó que pronto viajaría Rin arriba y que confiaba en que le enviaran fuera; entonces habría viajes hasta Kehl y Basilea. Entretanto se fueron uniendo a ellos otros conocidos; el nuevo tesorero hizo servir vino para todos, y la señora Hentjen se retiró. Comprobó con desagrado que Esch tocaba a la camarera Hede cada vez que ella pasaba cerca de su mesa y que finalmente la hizo sentar junto a él para que bebiera con el

grupo. Pero como las consumiciones subieron mucho, cuando los señores se fueron después de medianoche y se llevaron a Hede, ella le dio disimuladamente un marco.

A pesar de todo, Esch no estaba satisfecho con su nuevo empleo. Le parecía que había conseguido este puesto al precio de su salvación o, por lo menos, de su honestidad. Ahora que todo marchaba y que incluso había percibido un adelanto para el viaje en la filial que la Mittelrheinische tenía en Colonia, le entraron de nuevo las dudas sobre si debía o no formular la denuncia. Desde luego era evidente que él tendría que estar presente en las comprobaciones judiciales y que entonces no podría marcharse y, por tanto, perdería probablemente el empleo. Por un momento pensó en resolverlo enviando una carta anónima a la policía, pero desechó la idea: no podía borrarse una indecencia con otra. Para colmo le fastidiaban sus escrúpulos de conciencia; al fin y al cabo no era ningún niño, le importaban una mierda los curas y la moral; había leído todo tipo de cosas y, una vez que Geyring le presionaba de nuevo para que se afiliara al partido socialdemócrata, le había respondido: «No, no pienso unirme a vosotros los anarquistas, pero, para que veas que en parte cumplo tus deseos, tal vez me una a los librepensadores». Y aquel tipejo desagradecido había respondido que esto le daba igual. Así son los hombres, bueno, pues a Esch también podía darle igual.

A la postre hizo lo más sensato: llegado el momento, partió. Pero se sentía desplazado a la fuerza; la usual alegría de viajar no hacía acto de presencia, y, de todos modos, dejó en Colonia parte de sus cosas; dejó incluso su bicicleta. En cualquier caso, el dinero recibido para el viaje le hizo sentirse generoso. Y de pie en la estación de Maguncia, con un vaso de cerveza en la mano, con el billete en el sombrero, se acordó de los que había dejado y quiso demostrarles su afecto, y, como precisamente pasaba el vendedor de periódicos empujando su carrito, compró un par de postales. Quien merecía más que todos un saludo era Martin, pero a un hombre no se le mandan postales. Por eso la primera la dirigió a Hede; la segunda la destinó a mamá Hentjen. Después pensó que la señora Hentjen, con lo orgullosa que era, tal vez se sentiría ofendida al recibir una postal al mismo tiempo que una empleada suya y, como hoy le daba igual, rompió la primera y solo envió la de mamá Hentjen; enviaba cariñosos saludos para ella, para todos sus queridos amigos y conocidos, y para las señoritas Hede y Thusnelda desde la hermosa ciudad de Maguncia. Después se sintió de nuevo un poco solo, bebió otro vaso de cerveza y continuó su viaje a Mannheim.

Debía presentarse en la oficina central. La compañía naviera Mittelrheinische S. A. poseía un edificio propio no lejos del puerto Mühlan, una sólida casa de piedra, con columnas junto a la puerta. Daba a una calle asfaltada, muy apropiada para circular en bicicleta; era una calle nueva. La pesada puerta de cristales y hierro forjado, que de seguro se podía mover fácil y silenciosamente, estaba entreabierta, y Esch entró. Le gustó el mármol del vestíbulo. En lo alto de la escalera colgaba un letrero de cristal en cuya transparente superficie se leía en letras doradas: «Dirección». Se encaminó hacia allí. Cuando ya tenía el pie en el primer peldaño de la escalera, oyó una voz a sus espaldas: «¿Adónde va, por favor?». Se volvió y vio al portero, vestido con una librea gris en la que brillaban unos botones plateados; en la gorra también llevaba un galón de plata. Todo esto era muy bonito, pero Esch se sintió molesto: ¿qué pretendía de él aquel tipo?

—Me tengo que presentar aquí —contestó escuetamente, y se dispuso a continuar su camino.

Pero el otro no se amilanó:

—¿En la dirección?

—¿Dónde si no? —repuso Esch con acritud.

En el primer piso, la escalera terminaba en un amplio y oscuro vestíbulo. En el centro había una enorme mesa de roble y alrededor algunas sillas acolchadas. Evidentemente todo era muy elegante. Allí había otro tipo con botones plateados y le preguntó qué deseaba.

—Quiero ir a la dirección —dijo Esch.

—Los señores están celebrando una reunión del consejo administrativo —dijo el conserje—. ¿Es algo importante?

Esch no tuvo más remedio que explicarse; mostró sus papeles, el escrito de admisión, la orden de pago del adelanto para el viaje.

—También tengo un par de certificados —añadió, disponiéndose a presentar también el informe de Nentwig.

Pero constató decepcionado que aquel tipo no se dignaba ni echar una ojeada a los papeles:

—Aquí no tiene usted nada que hacer con esto. En la planta baja, al fondo del pasillo, la segunda escalera… Infórmese abajo.

Esch se quedó quieto un momento; no quería concederle el triunfo al conserje de la puerta, y preguntó de nuevo:

—¿O sea que no es aquí?

El conserje le daba ya la espalda, indiferente:

—No, esto es la antesala del presidente.

Esch se enfureció; pues no metían poco ruido con su presidente, muebles acolchados, ordenanzas

plateados; a Nentwig le encantaría todo esto. Bah, un presidente de esa clase no debía de valer mucho más que un Nentwig. Pero de buena o de mala gana, Esch tuvo que retroceder. Abajo estaba el portero. Esch le miró con atención para ver si ponía mala cara, pero como el hombre tenía un aire totalmente indiferente, Esch dijo:

—Tengo que ir al departamento de admisión de personal —y se hizo mostrar el camino. A los dos pasos se volvió y, señalando con el pulgar hacia lo alto de la escalera, preguntó—: ¿Cómo se llama el de allá arriba, vuestro presidente?

—Presidente Von Bertrand —respondió el portero, y en su tono había algo que parecía respeto.

Y Esch, también con cierto respeto, repitió para sí «Presidente Von Bertrand»; aquel nombre lo había oído ya en alguna parte.

En el departamento de personal se enteró de que ejercería sus funciones en los almacenes del puerto. Cuando salía de nuevo a la calle, un carruaje se detuvo frente al edificio. Hacía frío; en los bordillos de las aceras y en los recodos de las paredes había nieve en polvo acumulada allí por el viento; uno de los caballos golpeaba el asfalto con los cascos. Se veía que estaba impaciente, y con razón. «Sin carruaje no puede hacer nada el señor presidente», pensó Esch, «en cambio nosotros podemos ir a pie.» No obstante, aquello le gustó y estaba contento de pertenecer a la empresa. Suponía, al menos, un triunfo sobre Nentwig.

En los almacenes de la Mittelrheinische, ocupó su puesto tras una mampara de cristal, al fondo de un largo tinglado. Junto a su mesa estaba la del funcionario de aduanas, y detrás brillaba una pequeña estufa de hierro. Si a uno le fastidiaba el trabajo y se sentía de nuevo solo y abandonado, encontraba siempre algo que hacer en los vagones y en los trabajos de carga. Tenía que reemprenderse la navegación a los pocos días y en las embarcaciones todo estaba en movimiento. Había grúas que oscilaban y descendían como si pretendieran picotear cuidadosamente alguna cosa de los novios, y había otras que se inclinaban sobre el agua como puentes inacabados. Naturalmente, todo esto no era nuevo para Esch, pues en Colonia había más o menos lo mismo, pero allá la larga hilera de los cobertizos resultaba familiar, era algo de lo que uno ni se daba cuenta, y, si alguien le hubiera obligado a reflexionar sobre ello, habría considerado las edificaciones, las grúas y los embarcaderos casi como algo absurdo que tenía que existir para atender inexplicables necesidades de los seres humanos. Ahora, en cambio, todo esto de lo que él formaba parte, se había transformado, en instalaciones lógicas y convenientes, y esto le hacía bien. Mientras que antes le sorprendía, con frecuencia desagradablemente, que hubiera tantas firmas exportadoras y que los tinglados, todos iguales, que se extendían a lo largo de la orilla, ostentaran tantos letreros de firmas distintas, ahora cada empresa adquiría su propia individualidad, individualidad que uno reconocía en la persona de los almacenistas, gordos o delgados, y en la de los contramaestres, rudos o amables. Hasta las inscripciones de los departamentos aduaneros de la Alemania imperial que se encontraban a la entrada de la zona acotada del puerto resultaban agradables: le hacían a uno adquirir conciencia de que se movía en tierra extranjera. Era una vida atada y al mismo tiempo libre, la que uno llevaba en este refugio de mercancías, que podían acumularse aquí sin pagar derechos, y era un aire de fronteras el que se respiraba detrás de las verjas de hierro de la zona aduanera. Y, a pesar de que él no llevaba uniforme y era, por así decirlo, únicamente un empleado privado, la vida en común con los funcionarios de aduana y los empleados ferroviarios le había convertido casi en un personaje oficial, que llevaba además en el bolsillo una cédula de identificación que le permitía circular por toda la zona acotada sin trabas de ningún tipo, saludado casi amistosamente en la puerta principal por los guardias. Y entonces devolvía el saludo, tiraba el cigarrillo ostentosamente dibujando un arco en el aire, para respetar la prohibición de fumar que figuraba casi en todas partes, y, convertido en un perfecto «no fumador», dispuesto en todo momento a reprender a los civiles que pudieran contravenir eventualmente el reglamento, se dirigía a largos y pesados pasos hacia la oficina, donde el jefe del almacén tenía ya las listas sobre su mesa. Entonces se pone uno los guantes de lana gris con las puntas de los dedos cortados, para que no se hielen las manos en el frío gris y polvoriento del tinglado, coge la lista y controla las cajas y los fardos amontonados. Caso de que una de las cajas esté fuera de su sitio, no dejará de mirar impaciente o con recriminación al jefe de almacén, responsable de la colocación, a fin de que reprenda a su vez a los trabajadores correspondientes. Y cuando más tarde el funcionario de aduanas que está haciendo su ronda entra en la casilla de cristal, alaba el calor de la estufa encendida, se desabrocha el cuello de la camisa del uniforme, se despereza entre exclamaciones de bienestar y se deja caer contra el respaldo de la silla, las listas están ya controladas y ordenadas en el fichero, y el examen no es severo, sino que ambos hombres se sientan frente a la mesa y comentan tranquilamente las entradas. Después el empleado ratifica la lista con la acostumbrada rúbrica de su lapicero azul, coge la copia, la guarda en su escritorio y, si les apetece, se van a la cantina.

Desde luego, Esch había mejorado con el cambio, si bien la justicia había salido perjudicada. Con frecuencia no podía dejar de pensar —y era lo único que enturbiaba su satisfacción— en si no existiría algún medio de formular la denuncia que el deber le exigía; entonces todo estaría en orden.

El inspector de aduanas Balthasar Korn procedía de una región de Alemania muy sobria. Había nacido en la

zona intermedia entre las culturas bávara y sajona y recibido sus impresiones de juventud en la montañosa ciudad de Hof en Baviera. Su mentalidad oscilaba entre una sobria rudeza y una sobria codicia y, después de haberle llevado a alcanzar el grado de primer sargento en el servicio militar activo, aprovechó la ocasión que el Estado previsor brinda a sus fieles soldados y pasó al servicio de aduanas. No se había casado y vivía con su hermana Erna, también soltera, en Mannheim, y, como le fastidiaba sobremanera ver vacío el cuarto que daba al patio, convenció a August Esch para que dejara la cara habitación de la pensión y se acomodara en su casa por un precio más módico. Y aunque no estimaba del todo a Esch porque, al ser este luxemburgués, no podía comentar su servicio militar, no le habría disgustado traspasarle no solo el cuarto sino también la hermana. No escatimaba las correspondientes alusiones, que la muchacha, ya madurita, acompañaba con gestos avergonzados de denegación y con risitas. Incluso llegaba a poner en peligro la buena fama de su hermana, pues no tenía ningún reparo en llamar «señor cuñado» a Esch en la cantina ante todo el mundo, con lo cual era inevitable pensar que el así llamado compartía la cama de su patrona. Pero si Korn actuaba de tal forma no era ni mucho menos solo por broma, sino que pretendía, en parte mediante la insistencia, en parte por la presión de la opinión pública, que Esch cambiara la situación ficticia en que él le colocaba con su actuación por una realidad sólida.

Esch se trasladó de buen grado a casa de Korn. Él, que tanto había deambulado ya, se sentía en esta ocasión como abandonado. Tal vez se debiera a las calles numeradas de Mannheim, tal vez a que echaba de menos el olor de la taberna de mamá Hentjen, o quizá influyera en ello el asunto de aquel puerco, Nentwig, que todavía le pesaba en el ánimo. En resumen, se sentía solo, y por eso se quedó en casa de los dos hermanos, y siguió allí pese a que desde hacía tiempo veía de dónde soplaba el viento en casa de los Korn, y pese a que no pensaba entablar relación de ningún tipo con aquella mujer de aspecto avejentado: no hacía ningún caso del prolijo y rico ajuar que Erna había ido acumulando en el transcurso de los años y que le había mostrado con orgullo, ni tampoco le encandilaba la libreta de ahorro, con más de dos mil marcos, que ella en cierta ocasión le enseñara. Pero los esfuerzos de Korn para obligarle a caer en la trampa eran tan divertidos, que uno podía arriesgarse un poco; naturalmente había que andar prevenido y no dejarse engañar. Por ejemplo: cuando, camino de su casa, se encontraban en la cantina, Korn raras veces permitía que Esch se pagase la cerveza; y, cuando se habían desatado en improperios contra la mala calidad de las bebidas de Mannheim, nada podía hacer desistir a Korn de que debían ir a la Spatenbräu. Y si Esch se llevaba la mano al bolsillo, Korn siempre protestaba: «Ya tendrá usted ocasión de tomarse la revancha, querido cuñado». Y cuando se arrastraban por la Rheinstrasse, el señor inspector de aduanas se detenía puntualmente frente a los escaparates iluminados y apoyaba su manaza en el hombro de Esch: «Mi hermana hace tiempo que desea un paraguas como este, se lo compraré el día de su santo», o: «Todas las casas deberían tener una plancha de gas como esta», o: «Si mi hermana tuviera una máquina de lavar, sería feliz». Y como Esch no decía nada ante tales comentarios, Korn se ponía tan furioso como en otro tiempo contra los reclutas que se negaban a comprender el modo de desmontar el fusil, y cuanto más en silencio permanecía Esch andando a su lado, más encolerizaba a Korn la expresión un tanto insolente que Esch adoptaba.

Con todo, si Esch callaba en estas ocasiones, no era por avaricia. Era ahorrador y no desaprovechaba las pequeñas ventajas que pudieran presentarse, mas la contabilidad sólida y legalista de su alma no le permitía aceptar mercancías sin pagar; un servicio exige otro servicio recíproco, y las mercancías requieren un pago; además consideraba innecesario meterse en una compra precipitada; incluso le hubiera parecido cruel y grosero hacer realidad los tenaces requerimientos de Korn. Por el momento había encontrado una forma muy curiosa de desquite que, por una parte, le permitía complacer un poco a Korn, pero por otra dejaba bien claro que él no tenía prisa por casarse. Después de cenar solía invitar a Korn a darse un garbeo, lo cual les llevaba a tabernas atendidas por camareras y terminaba indefectiblemente en las callejas de mala fama. A menudo la cuenta de los dos ascendía a una bonita suma —aunque Korn se veía obligado a pagar su propia compañera—, pero valía este dinero contemplar cómo regresaba Korn a su casa: caminaba junto a él enfurruñado, con el negro bigote de cepillo totalmente en desorden, mordisqueándolo a menudo y rezongando de pésimo talante que aquella vida licenciosa a la que Esch le inducía tenía que terminar. Además Korn al día siguiente hablaba en tales términos a su hermana que la hería en sus sentimientos más delicados, echándole en cara que no sería nunca capaz de retener a un hombre junto a ella. Y si su hermana, refunfuñando, le enumeraba la de veces que había conseguido hacerlo, él le hacía resaltar despectivamente su soltería.

Un día halló Esch buena ocasión para saldar parte de su deuda. En su recorrido por los almacenes de expedición, su siempre alerta curiosidad fue atraída por la forma curiosa de unas cajas y bultos de un material teatral que estaban descargando. Un caballero pulcramente afeitado se deshacía en gestos e improperios; gritaba que trataban sus pertenencias, de incalculable valor, como si fueran leña para el fuego, y como Esch, que estaba contemplando la operación con grave expresión de entendido, dio a los trabajadores del almacén un consejo innecesario, que tuvo el efecto de hacerle aparecer ante el caballero como persona digna y especializada, el extranjero dejó caer sobre él una catarata de palabras y pronto surgió entre ellos un diálogo

cordial, en el transcurso del cual el caballero, llevándose la mano al sombrero, se presentó como el director Gernerth, Gernerth con *th*, nuevo arrendatario del teatro Talía, que se sentiría gratamente complacido —entretanto habían finalizado las operaciones de descarga— si el señor inspector de expediciones asistiera con su honorable familia a la brillante función de estreno, para lo cual le proporcionaría gustosamente localidades a un precio reducido. Y como Esch asintiera con entusiasmo, el director se llevó la mano al bolsillo sin más preámbulos y extendió un vale para tres entradas gratuitas.

Así pues, Esch estaba ahora sentado entre los hermanos Korn ante una mesa cubierta con un blanco mantel en el teatro de variedades, cuyo programa se inició con una nueva atracción: las imágenes en movimiento llamadas cinematográficas. Estas imágenes no despertaron en ellos gran interés, ni tampoco en el resto del público; todos las tomaron poco en serio y únicamente las consideraron una introducción a la auténtica representación, aunque todos quedaron subyugados por la moderna forma artística en que se les ofrecía una comedia cuya comicidad se basaba en los efectos producidos por la ingestión de unas píldoras purgantes y en que los momentos críticos eran subrayados con redobles de tambor. Korn golpeaba sonoramente la mesa con la palma de la mano, la señorita Erna reía tapándose la boca con la mano, al tiempo que miraba picarescamente a Esch por entre los dedos, y Esch se sentía tan orgulloso como si fuera él mismo el inventor y autor del espectáculo. El humo de sus cigarrillos ascendía rectamente hacia la nube de tabaco que pronto flotó pegada al techo bajo de la sala, nube que atravesaban, adquiriendo matices plateados, los haces de luz de los focos que desde la galería iluminaban la escena. En el descanso que siguió a la exhibición de un artista cuyo arte consistía en silbar, Esch encargó tres vasos de cerveza, aunque en el teatro todo era evidentemente más caro que en cualquier otra parte, pero se alegró de que la cerveza fuera floja e insípida, de modo que se resolvió no encargar otra ronda e ir a beber algo a la Spatenbräu una vez terminada la representación. Se sintió nuevamente generoso y, mientras la prima donna expresaba lo mejor que podía su pasión y su dolor, murmuró: «Sí, el amor, señorita Erna».

Cuando se levantó de nuevo el telón tras el clamoroso aplauso que todo el público dispensó a la cantante, todo brillaba como plata, y allí arriba estaban unas mesitas niqueladas y otros objetos, también de níquel, pertenecientes a un malabarista. Sobre el terciopelo rojo que en parte cubría y en parte adornaba el aparato, descansaban las bolas y las botellas, las banderitas y las mazas, y también una enorme pila de platos blancos. De una escalera terminada en punta e igualmente niquelada y reluciente colgaban unos puñales, tal vez dos docenas, cuyas largas hojas no brillaban menos que todo el metal de la escena. El malabarista vestía un frac negro y le acompañaba una ayudante, que evidentemente llevaba consigo solo para que mostrase su belleza al público, pues llevaba una malla atornasolada muy ceñida al cuerpo y su única tarea consistía en alcanzarle al malabarista las banderitas o los platos, o en tirárselos cuando él los requería con una palmada en mitad de un ejercicio. Ella hacía todo esto con una graciosa sonrisa en los labios, y, cuando él le tiró las mazas, emitió un suave grito exótico, ya para atraer sobre sí la atención de su señor, ya para mendigar un poco del amor que él, inflexible, le negaba. Y aunque el malabarista sabía de sobra que su dureza de corazón le podía hacer perder la simpatía de la masa del público, no se dignó ni mirar a la hermosa; solo cuando llegó el momento de corresponder a los aplausos con una reverencia, señaló con un gesto displicente a su ayudante, indicando con ello que le cedía a ella un tanto por ciento de estos. A continuación, como si la afrenta que él le acababa de infringir no hubiera tenido lugar, se dirigen como buenos amigos al fondo del escenario, cogen entre los dos una gran tabla negra que nadie había visto antes y la acercan al andamio niquelado donde la fijan. Después la empujan, animándose mutuamente con suaves gritos y sonrisas, hasta colocarla inclinada como una rampa, y la atan después con hilos metálicos, que van surgiendo aquí y allá en el suelo y entre los postes. Una vez hecho esto, la hermosa ayudante emite de nuevo su suave y peculiar grito y salta con gran solemnidad sobre la tabla, la cual es tan alta que ella apenas alcanza el borde superior con los brazos extendidos. Entonces distingue uno en la parte de arriba de la tabla dos asideros a los que se coge ahora la ayudante, que se apoya con el dorso en la tabla, y esta postura forzada y artística, que hace resaltar aún más su figura con el traje relumbrante sobre el negro de la tabla, le confiere el aspecto de una crucificada. Pero ella no pierde su graciosa sonrisa, ni siquiera cuando el hombre se le acerca y la mira escrutador con los ojos entrecerrados y modifica su postura levemente, dando a entender a todos que hasta los milímetros cuentan. Todo esto tiene lugar a los acordes de un suave vals, cuyas notas enmudecen a una señal del malabarista. Se hace el silencio en la sala; desprovisto de toda música, una extraña soledad se apodera del escenario, y los camareros no pueden servir comidas ni cerveza; en actitud expectante, permanecen de pie junto a las puertas del fondo iluminadas de amarillo; todo aquel que estaba comiendo devuelve el tenedor al plato, aunque contuviera un bocado, y solo se sigue oyendo el rumor del foco que el electricista dirige de lleno sobre la crucificada. El malabarista prueba ya uno de los largos puñales en su mano asesina; echa hacia atrás la parte superior del cuerpo, y ahora es él quien emite el áspero y exótico grito, al tiempo que el cuchillo escapa silbante de su mano, cruza zumbando el escenario y se clava con un ruido sordo en la negra madera, junto al cuerpo de la muchacha crucificada. Antes de que uno se dé cuenta, tiene las manos llenas de puñales relucientes como espejos y, mientras sus gritos son cada vez más frecuentes, más bestiales y vehementes, silban los cuchillos con creciente rapidez cortando el aire tembloroso del escenario, se van clavando en la madera en trepidante

sucesión y enmarcan el esbelto cuerpo, los delicados brazos desnudos, enmarcan un rostro que sigue sonriendo, con la mirada fija y sometida, un rostro conquistador e implorante, atrevido y angustiado al mismo tiempo. A Esch le faltó muy poco para levantar los brazos al cielo, crucificado él también, deseando interponer su propio cuerpo entre los amenazadores cuchillos y la tierna muchacha; y si el malabarista, como a veces suelen hacer, hubiera preguntado si algún caballero del público quería subir al escenario para colocarse ante la tabla negra, con seguridad Esch se habría ofrecido. Sí, era un pensamiento casi voluptuoso el imaginarse allá solo y abandonado, y que los largos cuchillos pudieran clavarle a la tabla como si fuera una cucaracha; pero, rectificó, él debería estar con el rostro contra la tabla, pues no se ensarta ningún escarabajo por el lado del abdomen: y la idea de hallarse con el rostro pegado a las tinieblas de la tabla, sin saber en qué momento le alcanzaría por detrás el cuchillo mortal para atravesarle el corazón y dejarle clavado a la tabla, encerraba un atractivo tan extraordinario y misterioso, constituía un anhelo de tan nueva fuerza y madurez, que se sobresaltó, como arrancado de un sueño de felicidad, cuando los redobles del tambor, del bombo y las trompetas de la orquesta subrayaron alegres la actuación del malabarista, que acababa de tirar, triunfante, el último puñal, en tanto la muchacha se deslizaba fuera del marco que la rodeaba, ahora ya completo, y los dos, cogidos de la mano, trazando arcos a guisa de saludo con el brazo que les quedaba libre y efectuando una pirueta simétrica, se inclinaban ante el público aliviado. Eran las trompetas del juicio. El culpable era aplastado como un gusano; ¿por qué no era atravesado como una cucaracha? ¿Por qué la muerte en lugar de llevar una guadaña no puede llevar un largo alfiler, o por lo menos una lanza? Uno espera siempre ser llamado a juicio, pues, por más que una vez haya estado a punto de ingresar en las filas de los librepensadores, tiene su propia conciencia. Oyó decir a Korn: «Ha sido sensacional», y esto le sonó como una blasfemia; y cuando la señorita Erna opinó que, aunque se lo pidieran, ella no se exhibiría así, desnuda, ante el público, dejando que le echaran cuchillos, para Esch fue ya demasiado y apartó con un brusco movimiento la rodilla de Erna que se apoyaba en la suya; a gente como esa no se la podía tratar bien; advenedizos sin conciencia, eso eran, y no le impresionaba en absoluto que la señorita Erna corriera continuamente a confesarse, al contrario; hasta la vida que llevaban sus amigos de Colonia le parecía más sólida y decente.

En la Spatenbräu bebió Esch en silencio su cerveza negra. Traía en su espíritu un sentimiento que podría calificarse de nostalgia. Especialmente cuando afloró al exterior en el momento en que se trató de enviar una postal a mamá Hentjen. Que Erna quisiera participar con las palabras «cordiales saludos de Erna Korn» era muy natural, pero que Balthasar se empeñara también en intervenir y estampara una gran rúbrica tras «saludos, Korn, inspector de aduanas» era una especie de homenaje a la señora Hentjen, y Esch se enterneció tanto que se sintió vacilar: ¿había satisfecho hasta el final su deuda de honesto desquite? En realidad, para completar la fiesta, hubiera debido deslizarse en la habitación de Erna y, de no haber rechazado antes a Erna de forma tan brusca, seguramente no habría encontrado la puerta cerrada. Sí, este habría tenido que ser el justo y apropiado final, pero no hizo nada para llevarlo a cabo. Le atacó una especie de parálisis y no se preocupó más de Erna, no buscó su rodilla, y no ocurrió nada, ni en el camino de regreso ni después. Tenía, en cierto modo, remordimientos de conciencia, pero luego, August Esch constató tras madura reflexión que ya había hecho bastante y que incluso podía haberle acarreado pésimas consecuencias el dedicarse en demasía a la señorita Korn: sentía pesar sobre sí un destino que levantaba su lanza amenazadora dispuesto a castigarle si continuaba comportándose como un cerdo, y algo en su interior le decía que debía permanecer fiel a alguien, aunque no sabía a quién.

Mientras Esch sentía todavía en sus espaldas la punzada de su conciencia, hasta el punto de llegar a pensar que le había atacado una corriente de aire frío, y por la noche se friccionaba la espalda con una poderosa loción hasta donde le alcanzaba el brazo, mamá Hentjen se alegró por las dos postales que él le había enviado y, antes de pegarlas definitivamente en el álbum de postales, las colocó en el marco del espejo que había detrás del mostrador. Por las noches las cogía y las mostraba a los clientes habituales. Tal vez lo hizo también para que nadie pudiera decir de ella que mantenía correspondencia en secreto con un hombre; al hacer pasar las postales de mano en mano ya no estaban dirigidas a ella sino a la taberna, personalizada en ella por pura casualidad. Por eso también estuvo de acuerdo en que Geyring se encargara de responder, si bien no permitió que el señor Geyring corriera con los gastos, sino que adquirió el día siguiente una hermosa postal, de esas llamadas panorámicas, tres veces más larga que las de tamaño corriente, que reproducía Colonia en toda la extensión de su ribera azul oscura del Rin, y con espacio suficiente para muchas firmas. Ella la encabezó con estas palabras: «Muchas gracias por las hermosas postales, mamá Hentjen». Luego Geyring dijo en tono autoritario «las damas primero», y firmaron Hede y Thusnelda. A continuación venían los nombres de Wilhelm Lassman, de Bruno May, Hoelst, Wrobek, Hülsenschmitt, John, el nombre del mecánico inglés Andrew, del piloto Wingast y, finalmente, tras algunos más que apenas podían descifrarse, el nombre de Martin Geyring. Después Geyring escribió la dirección: «Señor August Esch, contable diplomado, Puerto Franco de la Compañía Naviera M. R., S. A., Mannheim» y a continuación pasó el producto ya terminado a la señora Hentjen, quien, tras una detenida lectura, abrió un cajón de la caja, para coger del canastillo metálico, cuyo compartimento más amplio contenía los billetes de banco, un sello de correos. Ahora aquella enorme postal con tantas firmas le parecía casi un honor excesivo para Esch, quien no figuraba ni mucho menos entre los

clientes distinguidos de su taberna. Pero como ella perseguía la perfección en todo cuanto hacía y en la amplia postal, pese a los numerosos nombres, había quedado un espacio en blanco lo suficiente grande como para herir su sentido de la belleza y ofrecerle la posibilidad de demostrarle a Esch cuáles eran sus límites, ocupándolo con un nombre de humilde condición, mamá Hentjen llevó la postal a la cocina para hacerla firmar por la criada, y se sintió doblemente satisfecha, ya que con ello podía también proporcionar a la muchacha una satisfacción, muy económica por cierto.

Cuando regresó al local, Martin estaba sentado en su sitio habitual, en el rincón junto al mostrador, absorto en la lectura de uno de sus periódicos socialistas. La señora Hentjen se sentó a su lado y, como tantas otras veces, le dijo bromeando: «Señor Geyring, acarreará usted mala fama a mi local si continúa leyendo aquí sus periódicos sediciosos». «Bastante rabia me dan a mí esos emborronadores de periódicos», fue la respuesta, «mientras nosotros trabajamos, ellos llenan papeles con idioteces.»

Nuevamente, la señora Hentjen se sintió un poco decepcionada frente a Geyring, pues siempre esperaba de él manifestaciones revolucionarias y llenas de odio en las que ella pudiera apacentar su propia aversión hacia el mundo. A menudo había echado una ojeada a los periódicos socialistas pero, a decir verdad, lo que había hallado en ellos le había parecido siempre muy pacífico, y por eso esperaba que el diálogo vivo le ofreciera algo más que el impreso. La tranquilizaba, por una parte, que Geyring no tuviera en buena consideración a la gente de la prensa, pues siempre le había parecido justo que uno despreciara a los otros, pero, por otra, se quedaba sin lo que esperaba. No, no había nada que hacer con un anarquista así, con alguien que permanecía sentado en su oficina del sindicato como un sargento de policía en la suya, y la señora Hentjen tuvo de nuevo el firme convencimiento de que el mundo solo era una confabulación entre los hombres establecida únicamente para perjudicar y decepcionar a las mujeres. Hizo otra tentativa:

—¿Qué es lo que no le parece bien en sus periódicos, señor Geyring?

—Arman mucho ruido con tonterías —refunfuñó Geyring—. Con su palabrería revolucionaria vuelven loca a nuestra gente y nosotros hemos de pagar el pato.

La señora Hentjen no comprendió bien; además, el asunto había dejado de interesarle. Pero por cortesía dijo suspirando:

—Desde luego, las cosas no son fáciles.

Geyring pasó una hoja y contestó en tono distraído:

—Efectivamente, las cosas no son fáciles, mamá Hentjen.

—Y un hombre como usted, siempre al pie del cañón, incansable desde la mañana hasta bien entrada la noche…

—Para nosotros tardará aún mucho en llegar la jornada de ocho horas —contestó Geyring, casi con satisfacción—. Primero será para todos los demás.

—Y a una persona así se le ponen trabas…

La señora Hentjen estaba asombrada, meneó la cabeza y contempló su peinado en el espejo.

—En el Reichstag y en los periódicos gritan mucho esos judíos —explotó Geyring—, pero cuando se trata de servir al sindicato desaparecen por el foro.

Esto sí lo comprendió la señora Hentjen, y en tono ofendido añadió:

—Están en todas partes, se hacen con todo el dinero y se arrojan sobre las mujeres como machos cabríos.

En su rostro se reflejaba de nuevo el asco. Martin levantó la vista del periódico y no pudo evitar una sonrisa:

—No hay para tanto, mamá Hentjen.

—O sea, que ahora se pone usted de parte de ellos… —en su voz se reflejaba una histérica agresividad—. No sabéis hacer otra cosa que apoyaros mutuamente, vosotros, los hombres. —Y a renglón seguido añadió—: Otra población, otra mujer.

—Es posible, mamá Hentjen —contestó Martin riendo—, pero es difícil que en otra parte haya una cocina tan buena como la de mamá Hentjen.

La señora Hentjen se apaciguó:

—En Mannheim tampoco —afirmó, mientras le tendía a Geyring la postal para que la enviara a Esch.

El director teatral Gernerth formaba parte ahora del círculo más estrecho de amigos de Esch. Pues Esch, hombre impetuoso e impulsivo, compró al día siguiente una entrada para la representación, no solo porque tenía ganas de volver a ver a la valerosa muchacha, sino también para poder buscar al terminar la función al un tanto sorprendido Gernerth en la oficina de dirección y presentarse a él como un espectador que ha pagado su entrada; además aprovechó la circunstancia para agradecerle una vez más la agradable velada del día anterior. El director Gernerth, que temía el pedido de nuevas entradas gratis y se disponía a cerrar decididamente la cartera, tuvo que mostrarse, en cambio, gratamente sorprendido. Ante tan amable acogida, Esch permaneció allí un rato y consiguió su segundo propósito: conocer al malabarista señor Teltscher y a su valerosa amiga la señorita Ilona, ambos de origen húngaro; especialmente la señorita Ilona, que dominaba

muy mal el alemán, mientras el señor Teltscher, que trabajaba con el nombre artístico de Teltini y que en escena hablaba pseudoinglés, procedía de Presburgo.

El señor Gernerth, en cambio, era natural de Eger, circunstancia que causó gran alegría a Korn la primera vez que se habían encontrado, pues Eger y Hof son ciudades tan cercanas que a Korn le parecía una casualidad maravillosa que dos personas casi compatriotas se encontraran precisamente en Mannheim. Pero sus manifestaciones de alegría y sorpresa fueron pura retórica, porque el hecho de ser casi paisanos, en otra ocasión menos propicia, habría despertado en él solo indiferencia. Invitó a Gernerth a su casa y a conocer a su hermana, pues no podía soportar que su presunto cuñado tuviera amigos en privado, y por idénticos motivos el señor Teltscher fue asimismo invitado muy pronto a tomar café.

Ahora estaban sentados en torno a la mesa redonda, sobre la cual, al lado de la tripuda cafetera, se apilaba una artística pirámide de pasteles que Esch había traído, y la lluvia de la melancólica tarde de domingo corría por los cristales. El señor Gernerth, que se esforzaba por animar la conversación, dijo: «Tiene usted una vivienda muy bonita, señor inspector, grande y luminosa…», y miró por la ventana hacia la triste calle de suburbio llena de charcos. La señorita Erna especificó que era simplemente modesta, como correspondía a su condición, pero que el hogar propio era realmente lo único que embellecía la existencia. El señor Gernerth se sintió en vena poética: el hogar propio, más valioso que el oro, sí, ella podía decirlo, pero para un artista era un sueño irrealizable; ay, para él no existía el hogar; claro que tenía una vivienda, una bonita vivienda allá en Munich, donde se encontraban su mujer y sus hijos, pero él apenas conocía a su familia. ¿Que por qué no la llevaba consigo? Esta no era vida para los niños, cambiar de residencia a cada estación y todo lo demás. No, sus hijos no serían artistas, sus hijos no. Evidentemente era un buen padre y su buen corazón emocionó no solo a la señorita Erna sino también a Esch. Y tal vez porque se sentía solo, comentó: «Yo soy huérfano, puede decirse que no conocí a mi madre». «¡Dios mío!», suspiró la señorita Erna. Pero el señor Teltscher, a quien no parecía gustar el triste tema de la conversación, hizo bailar una taza de café en la yema de un dedo y todos se rieron, con excepción de Ilona, que permanecía sentada en la silla con aire ausente y que probablemente economizaba las sonrisas que se vería obligada a prodigar para amenizar la velada. Vista de cerca no era ni con mucho tan dulce y encantadora como en escena, incluso quizá un poco vulgar; su rostro era levemente fofo, con unas grandes bolsas debajo de los ojos llenas de pecas, y Esch, que se estaba volviendo desconfiado, sospechó que tal vez su hermoso pelo rubio no era auténtico, sino una peluca; pero estas ideas desaparecieron en cuanto se imaginó el cuerpo de la muchacha rodeado por puñales zumbantes. Después se dio cuenta de que los ojos de Korn también recorrían este cuerpo e intentó atraer la atención de Ilona hacia él, preguntándole si le gustaba Mannheim, si ya conocía el Rin y otras cuestiones geográficas. Desgraciadamente no tuvo éxito, pues Ilona se limitó a contestar solo de vez en cuando y equivocadamente con un «sí, desde luego», y daba la impresión de no desear establecer ningún contacto ni con él ni con Korn; bebía su café con aire serio y meditabundo, e incluso cuando Teltscher le susurró algo en su idioma patrio, evidentemente algo desagradable, apenas le prestó atención. La señorita Erna, entretanto, le estaba diciendo a Gernerth que una feliz vida familiar era lo más hermoso de este mundo, y le daba a Esch golpecitos con la punta del pie, ya fuera para animarle a imitar el ejemplo de Gernerth, ya fuera únicamente para distraer su atención de la húngara, cuya belleza, sin embargo, no dejó de alabar: pues no escapó a su mirada de lagartija la codicia con que su hermano contemplaba a aquella mujer, y le pareció más conveniente que la hermosa le tocara en suerte a su hermano y no a Esch. Acarició pues las manos de Ilona, y alabó su blancura, corrió la manga hacia arriba y dijo que la señorita tenía una piel finísima, Balthasar podía comprobarlo. Balthasar le puso encima su garra peluda. Teltscher se rió y dijo que todas las húngaras tenían una piel suave como la seda, a lo cual Erna, que también tenía piel, replicó que todo dependía del cuidado con que se tratara y que ella se lavaba el rostro con leche todos los días. Ciertamente, dijo Gernerth, ella poseía un cutis maravilloso, un cutis en verdad internacional, y el rostro marchito de la señorita Erna se iluminó en una amplia sonrisa que dejó ver unos dientes amarillos y un hueco entre las muelas a la izquierda del maxilar superior, y enrojeció hasta las sienes, donde le colgaban unos pequeños mechones castaños algo descoloridos.

Había ido cayendo la tarde; la mano de Korn sostenía cada vez con más firmeza la de Ilona, y la señorita Erna esperaba que Esch, o por lo menos Gernerth, hiciera otro tanto con la suya. No se atrevía a encender la lámpara, porque temía que Balthasar se opusiera a tal estorbo, pero por fin tuvo que levantarse para ir a buscar el licor, elaborado por ella misma, que se conservaba en una garrafa azul sobre la cómoda. Comunicando a todos orgullosamente que la receta era un secreto suyo, escanció el brebaje, que tenía un ligero sabor a cerveza pasada, pero que, en opinión de Gernerth, era delicioso, criterio que reforzó besándole la mano. Esch recordó que mamá Hentjen no podía soportar a los bebedores de aguardiente y le llenó de satisfacción pensar que ella tendría muchas cosas en contra de Korn, quien ingería una copa tras otra haciendo chasquear la lengua y relamiéndose el oscuro bigote hirsuto. Korn sirvió también a Ilona, y probablemente correspondía a su inmutable indiferencia e inmovilismo el permitir que él le acercase la copa a los labios y el no dar la menor importancia al gesto de él cuando rozó con sus labios y su bigote el borde de la copa diciendo que esto era un beso. Es muy posible que Ilona no comprendiera, en cambio Teltscher tenía que darse cuenta de lo que estaba sucediendo y era inaudito que lo contemplara impasible. Tal vez sufriera en su interior, pero

era demasiado educado para provocar una escena. Esch sintió enormes deseos de intervenir en su lugar, pero se acordó del tono áspero con que Teltscher requería en escena los servicios de la animosa muchacha. ¿Acaso pretendía humillarla intencionadamente? ¡Algo tenía que ocurrir, uno debía interponerse con los brazos extendidos! Pero Teltscher le puso con alegre ademán la mano en el hombro, le llamó colega y *confrère* y, como Esch le mirase interrogativamente, le dijo señalando a las dos parejas: «Bueno, nosotros, los solteros, debemos mantenernos unidos». A lo que la señorita Erna, cambiándose de sitio y sentándose entre Esch y Gernerth, repuso: «Entonces yo tengo que apiadarme de ustedes». «Claro, un pobre artista siempre resulta poca cosa», replicó molesto el señor Gernerth. «¡Ay, esos comerciantes!» Teltscher opinó que Esch no debía permitir que se dijera esto, ya que únicamente en la profesión de comerciante se podían encontrar solidez y amplios horizontes. También el teatro podía considerarse, evidentemente, como un negocio, y de los más difíciles; por eso sentía profundo respeto por el señor Gernerth, el cual no solo era su director sino en cierto modo también su socio y a quien, desde luego, dentro de su estilo, podía considerarse un buen comerciante, aunque no siempre supiera sacar provecho de sus posibilidades de éxito en la medida correspondiente. Él, Teltscher-Teltini, podía opinar sobre ello con conocimiento de causa, porque había empezado como comerciante antes de dedicarse a la profesión de artista. «¿Y cuál es el final de la canción? Pues que estoy sentado aquí, cuando podría tener en América contratos estupendos… ¿O es que mi número no es de primera?» A Esch le vino de pronto a la mente un recuerdo confuso: ¿qué tenía el comercio para que lo alabasen tanto? Y esta solidez tan ponderada estaba muy lejos de ser real. Se lo dijo sin ambages y concluyó: «Naturalmente, hay diferencias. Por ejemplo, el señor Nentwig y el presidente Von Bertrand son ambos hombres de negocios, el primero es un cerdo y el segundo… el segundo es otra cosa, es mejor». Korn refunfuñó en tono despectivo que Bertrand era un oficial fugado del ejército, todo el mundo lo sabía, y que, por tanto, no tenía de qué presumir. A Esch no le disgustó oír esto; así pues la diferencia no era tan grande. Sin embargo, Bertrand era mejor a pesar de todo. Por otra parte Esch no quería profundizar en estas cosas. Teltscher, entretanto, seguía hablando de América: allá era todo maravilloso, se podía llegar muy alto, sin necesidad de matarse trabajando inútilmente como aquí. Y recurrió a una cita: «América, para ti todo es fácil». Gernerth suspiró; si uno al menos fuera lo bastante comerciante, las cosas serían de otra manera: él había sido muy rico una vez pero, pese a su talento comercial, tenía la confianza infantil de un artista, y todo el capital, casi un millón de marcos, le había sido arrebatado mediante una estafa. ¡Para que viera el señor Esch lo rico que había sido el director Gernerth! *Tempi passati*. Pero sabría rehacerse. Pensaba en un monopolio teatral, una sociedad anónima por cuyas acciones la gente se pelearía. Solo había que adaptarse a los tiempos que corrían y, desde luego, reunir el capital. Besó nuevamente la mano de la señorita Erna, se hizo llenar otra vez la copa y dijo relamiéndose: «Delicioso», sin soltar la mano que se le abandonó deliberada y gozosamente. Pero Esch, absorto en lo que estaba oyendo, apenas se dio cuenta de que el zapato de la señorita Erna se posaba sobre el suyo. Solamente entrevió, de lejos y en la oscuridad, que la amarillenta mano de Korn surgía por debajo de la axila de Ilona y no era difícil adivinar que el poderoso brazo de Balthasar Korn rodeaba la espalda de la muchacha.

Por fin tuvieron que encender la luz, y todos se pusieron a hablar a la vez, excepto Ilona, que permaneció en silencio. Y como se acercaba la hora de la función y no tenían ganas de separarse, Gernerth invitó a sus anfitriones a presenciar la representación. Se arreglaron y tomaron el tranvía para ir al centro de la ciudad. Las dos señoras se sentaron en el interior y los caballeros permanecieron en la plataforma fumando sus cigarrillos. La fría lluvia salpicaba sus rostros enrojecidos, y era agradable.

El comerciante al que August Esch solía comprar sus cigarros a buen precio se llamaba Fritz Lohberg. Era un hombre joven, más o menos de la misma edad que Esch, y tal vez por esta razón Esch, que de ordinario trataba con gente mayor, le hablaba como si el otro fuera idiota. No obstante, este idiota estaba adquiriendo importancia en su vida, una importancia no decisiva, pero en realidad al propio Esch le habría tenido que sorprender la facilidad con que se había acostumbrado a aquella tienda y se había convertido en cliente de Lohberg. La tienda le cogía de camino, cierto, pero no era motivo suficiente para que se sintiera en ella como en su casa. Desde luego era una tienda muy pulcra en la que daba gusto detenerse: el claro y puro aroma de tabaco que flotaba en la estancia proporcionaba al olfato una agradable sensación y resultaba grato pasar la mano por el pulido mostrador, en uno de cuyos extremos había siempre algunas cajas de cigarros de muestra y una cajita de cerillas junto a la caja automática, bellamente niquelada. Si uno compraba algo, recibía gratis un paquete de cerillas, lo cual demostraba una delicada generosidad. También había un enorme aparato para cortar los cigarros, y si uno quería encender de inmediato su puro, no tenía más que tendérselo al señor Lohberg y este le cortaba la punta con un breve chasquido. Era un buen lugar para pasar el rato; claro, soleado y agradable tras sus relucientes escaparates, y en estos días fríos lleno de un calorcillo bueno y podríamos decir uniforme, que se extendía por las blancas baldosas y se distanciaba benéfico de la polvorienta y excesivamente caldeada jaula de cristal del almacén. Todo esto bastaba para acudir gustosamente a este lugar después del trabajo o en el descanso del mediodía. Entonces se alababa el orden, se despotricaba sobre

la porquería en que uno tenía que moverse; pero esto no se decía muy en serio, ya que Esch sabía perfectamente que el hermoso orden que él mantenía en sus libros y listas de almacén no podía traspasarse a los montones de cajas, fardos y toneles, por mucho que quisiera el encargado. Aquí en la tienda, en cambio, reinaba un extrañamente tranquilizador orden rectilíneo y una precisión casi femenina, que resultaba tanto más extraña cuanto para Esch era casi inimaginable, o al menos solo podía imaginárselo con disgusto, que una chica pudiera vender cigarros; pese a su pulcritud, era un trabajo de hombre, algo que le hacía pensar en la buena camaradería: así tenía que ser la amistad entre hombres y no tan ocasional y burda como la solidaridad sin orden de un secretario de sindicatos. Pero Esch no se planteaba problemas sobre tales cuestiones; solo surgían así, de paso. En cambio resultaba extraño y sorprendente que Lohberg no se mostrara contento con la suerte que le había tocado, y con la que hubiera podido ser feliz, y todavía resultaban más grotescas las razones que Lohberg aducía y que demostraban claramente que era un idiota. Pues, aunque había colgado de la caja automática un letrero de cartón que decía «Fumar no perjudica a nadie», y aunque adjuntaba a las cajas de cigarros hermosas tarjetas que, además de indicar la casa comercial y las especialidades, llevaban escritos los versos «Quien siempre hierbas puras ha fumado, nunca al médico ha necesitado», él mismo no creía en ello, fumaba sus propios cigarrillos solo por sentido del deber y por mala conciencia, y, en el constante temor del cáncer llamado de los fumadores, experimentaba en el corazón, en el estómago, en la faringe, los funestos efectos de la nicotina. Era un hombrecillo pequeño y flaco, con un oscuro esbozo de bigote y unos ojos sin brillo en los que destacaba el blanco, y tanto sus modales como sus movimientos, un poco sinuosos, contrastaban de modo tan chocante con todas sus convicciones como el negocio que regentaba, que sin embargo no tenía intención de cambiar por otro: no solo veía en el tabaco el envenenamiento del pueblo y el despilfarro del bienestar nacional, repitiendo constantemente que había que liberar al pueblo de ese veneno, sino que se erguía en defensor de una vida y una esencia alemana auténticas, grandes, naturales, y su mayor pesar era no poder ostentar una rotunda musculatura y una rotunda rubiez. Compensaba un poco esta desventaja siendo miembro de asociaciones antialcohólicas y vegetarianas y por eso tenía junto a la caja registradora buen número de revistas especializadas que le eran enviadas, en su mayor parte, desde Suiza. No cabía duda, era un idiota.

Esch, a quien le encantaba fumar, zamparse grandes filetes de carne y beber vino siempre que se presentaba la ocasión, no se habría dejado impresionar por los argumentos del señor Lohberg, a pesar de la fascinadora palabra «redención», repetida una y mil veces, si no hubiera visto un curioso paralelismo con la actitud de mamá Hentjen. Desde luego, mamá Hentjen era una mujer sensata, incluso excesivamente sensata, y no tenía nada que ver con este galimatías. Pero cuando Lohberg, fiel a las directrices calvinistas, que recibía a través de las revistas desde Suiza, tronaba como un cura contra los placeres sensuales y al mismo tiempo, como si fuera un orador socialista en una reunión de librepensadores, defendía una vida libre y sencilla en el seno de la naturaleza, cuando hacía pensar por su mezquina persona que el mundo tenía un gran fallo, un terrible error en el libro de contabilidad, que solo podía redimirse mediante una milagrosa inserción, en toda esta confusión únicamente quedaba claro que el negocio de mamá Hentjen y la tienda de tabacos de Lohberg padecían el mismo mal: ella tenía que ganarse el sustento con hombres borrachos, y también odiaba y despreciaba su medio de vida y su clientela. Sin lugar a dudas, era una extraña coincidencia, y Esch pensó en escribir a mamá Hentjen al respecto, para que también se sorprendiera de la casualidad. Pero no lo hizo, porque reflexionó mejor y supuso que tal vez a la señora Hentjen le chocaría o incluso la ofendería que la comparase a un hombre que, a pesar de todas sus virtudes, era un idiota. Lo dejó pues para comunicárselo de palabra: pronto iría a Colonia por exigencias del trabajo.

De todos modos, el caso Lohberg merecía ser discutido; una noche en que compartía la mesa con Korn y la señorita Erna, no pudo abstenerse de hablar de ello.

Los dos hermanos conocían, por supuesto, al comerciante de tabacos. Korn había comprado a veces en su tienda, pero nada había notado sobre sus peculiaridades: «Nadie lo diría por su aspecto», expresó como conclusión a una serie de pensamientos internos, con los que se adhería a la opinión de Esch de que se trataba de un idiota. La señorita Erna, en cambio, concibió una profunda aversión hacia aquel doble espiritual de la señora Hentjen y se preguntaba, sobre todo, si la señora Hentjen no sería el gran amor del señor Esch, tanto tiempo secreto. Debía de ser una dama muy virtuosa, pero creía sinceramente poder rivalizar con ella. En cuanto a las virtudes del señor Lohberg, naturalmente no resultaba agradable que alguien, en este caso su hermano, llenara las cortinas de humo, pero al menos esto indicaba que había un hombre en la casa. «Un hombre que no hace nada, que solo bebe agua…», ella buscaba las palabras, «me resultaría repugnante.» Y entonces preguntó si el señor Lohberg había conocido el amor de alguna mujer. «Seguro que este idiota es todo inocencia», opinó Esch, y Korn, presintiendo que con ello obtendría su aprobación, exclamó: «¡El casto José!».

Fuera por eso, fuera porque mantenía vigilado a su inquilino, o simplemente porque así ocurrió, lo cierto es que Korn se convirtió también en asiduo cliente de la tienda de Lohberg, y Lohberg se echaba a temblar

cada vez que entraba el inspector de aduanas haciendo sonar sus tacones. Su temor no era injustificado. Una de las noches siguientes, poco antes de cerrar, llegó Korn con Esch a la tienda de Lohberg y dijo en tono autoritario: «Prepárate, muchacho, hoy vas a perder tu inocencia».

Lohberg puso ojos de espanto y señaló con un gesto a un hombre con el uniforme del Ejército de Salvación que estaba en el local.

—Un enmascarado —dijo Korn.

—Un amigo mío —presentó, muy confuso, Lohberg.

—Nosotros también somos amigos —hizo constar Korn, y tendió su manaza al tipo del Ejército de Salvación.

Era un muchacho pelirrojo, pecoso, con granos, a quien habían enseñado que hay que mostrarse amistoso con todas las almas; sonrió abiertamente a Korn y lanzó un cable a Lohberg:

—El hermano Lohberg nos ha prometido incorporarse hoy a luchar en nuestras filas. Por eso he venido a buscarle.

—Si se trata de lucha, nosotros vamos con vosotros. —Korn estaba entusiasmado—. Somos amigos…

—Todos los amigos son bienvenidos entre nosotros —dijo el risueño soldado del Ejército de Salvación.

Lohberg no fue consultado; tenía una expresión de chiquillo atrapado en falta y cerró la tienda con aire asustado. Esch había contemplado divertido la escena, pero como le molestaban los aires que se daba Korn, dio unos golpecitos benévolos en la espalda de Lohberg, exactamente igual que Teltscher solía hacerlo con él.

Salieron al barrio de Neckar. Cuando llegaron a la Käfertalerstrasse, oyeron ya tambores y platillos, y las piernas de soldado de Korn siguieron el ritmo. Al llegar al final de la calle, vieron a la luz del atardecer a los miembros del Ejército de Salvación a la entrada del parque. Había caído una nieve fina y acuosa, y allí donde se había reunido el pequeño grupo la nieve se había convertido en una especie de sopa negra, que se introducía helada dentro de las botas. El teniente estaba de pie sobre un banco y elevaba la voz en la naciente oscuridad: «¡Venid a nosotros! ¡Dejaos salvar! ¡El Redentor se acerca para liberar a las almas prisioneras!». Pero muy pocos acudían a su llamada, y cuando sus soldados, acompañados de tambores y platillos, entonaron un cántico sobre el amor redentor y elevaron al cielo su aleluya «¡Oh, Señor, Dios de los ejércitos, líbranos de la muerte!», casi ninguno de los civiles presentes se unió al canto, y seguramente la mayoría solo contemplaba el espectáculo por simple curiosidad. Y, pese a que los bravos soldados cantaban con toda la fuerza de sus pulmones y las dos muchachas batían ruidosamente los tambores, hubo cada vez menos gente a su alrededor a medida que iba oscureciendo y al poco tiempo estuvieron solos con su teniente y tenían de espectadores solo a Lohberg, Korn y Esch. Lohberg, probablemente, se hubiera unido a los cánticos, lo hubiera hecho sin avergonzarse ni sentir ningún temor ante Korn o ante Esch, si Korn no le hubiera ordenado mientras le daba con el codo en las costillas: «¡Cante con ellos, Lohberg!». No era una situación agradable para Lohberg y se alegró de que llegara un policía y les ordenara circular. Entonces se dirigieron a la Thomasbräu. Y habría sido, sin embargo, maravilloso que Lohberg hubiera cantado, sí, hasta puede que hubiera ocurrido un pequeño milagro, pues había faltado muy poco para que Esch elevara también su voz en alabanza del Altísimo y del amor redentor; en efecto, había faltado únicamente un ligero impulso, y tal vez el canto de Lohberg hubiera sido este impulso. Pero esto ya pertenecía al pasado.

Esch no comprendía lo que acababa de suceder allí fuera: las dos muchachas habían tocado los tamboriles, mientras su comandante permanecía de pie sobre el banco y las dirigía con un gesto, y todo ello recordaba curiosamente las órdenes que Teltscher daba a Ilona sobre el escenario. Tal vez fuera la calma repentina del atardecer, que enmudecía aquí en el límite de la ciudad, como enmudecía la música en el teatro, o la inmovilidad de los negros ramajes de los árboles que se destacaban rígidos contra el cielo cada vez más oscuro, mientras detrás en la plaza se encendían las luces en forma de arco. Todo seguía siendo incomprensible. A través de los zapatos penetraba hiriente el frío de la nieve derretida; pero no era solo por eso que Esch hubiera preferido estar sobre el banco seco, predicando la redención y la salvación, sino que sentía dentro de sí nuevamente aquella extraña sensación de huérfana soledad, y de repente había comprendido con terrible claridad que tendría que morir completamente solo. Le embargó una vaga y sin embargo curiosa esperanza de que todo sería mejor, mucho mejor, si hubiera podido estar encima del banco: vio a Ilona ante él, a una Ilona vestida con el uniforme del Ejército de Salvación, una Ilona que elevaba sus ojos hacia él en espera de un gesto liberador para tocar el tamboril y entonar el himno. Pero Korn se había plantado a su lado con su sonrisa de conejo, sacando la cabeza del cuello mojado del abrigo, y esta visión hizo que se desvaneciera la esperanza. Esch torció la boca, su expresión se tornó despectiva y casi le pareció bien que no existiera ninguna comunidad. En cualquier caso, se alegró de que el policía los hubiera dispersado.

Delante iba Lohberg con el soldado del Ejército de Salvación, sucio de barro, y con una de las dos muchachas. Esch pisoteaba la nieve tras ellos. Sí, ya toquen el tambor o lancen los platos, basta con que se lo ordenen, es siempre lo mismo y lo único que varía es el traje. Y entonan cánticos al amor en cualquier parte. «Amor perfecto y redentor», Esch no pudo contener la risa y decidió comunicar su opinión al respecto a la valiente muchacha salutista. Cuando llegaron cerca de la Thomasbräu, la muchacha se detuvo, apoyó el pie en un saliente del muro, se inclinó y empezó a abrocharse los cordones de las mojadas y deformadas botas. En

aquella postura, así encogida, el negro sombrero de paja inclinado sobre las rodillas, era una masa completamente inhumana, un aborto de la naturaleza, aunque poseía, sin embargo, cierto realismo mecánico, por así decirlo, y Esch, que en otras circunstancias habría aprovechado tal postura para dar una palmadita a la parte del cuerpo más sobresaliente, se asustó un poco al comprobar que no sentía ningún deseo de hacerlo, y casi le pareció que se había derrumbado un puente más entre él y sus semejantes y echó de menos Colonia. En aquella ocasión, en la cocina, él había deseado ponerle las manos debajo de los pechos; sí, a mamá Hentjen le estaba permitido agacharse para abrocharse los zapatos. Pero como todos los hombres tienen idénticos pensamientos, Korn, que cuando estaba de buen humor tuteaba a todo el mundo, señaló a la muchacha: «¿Crees que se dejaría?». Esch le lanzó una mirada envenenada, pero Korn persistió en su idea: «Seguro que estos soldados lo hacen entre sí». Entretanto habían llegado a la cervecería y penetraron en la sala clara y ruidosa, donde olía agradablemente a asado, cebollas y cerveza.

Aquí sufrió Korn una decepción, pues los miembros del Ejército de Salvación no se dejaron convencer y no quisieron sentarse con ellos a la mesa, sino que se despidieron y se congregaron para vender sus periódicos en la sala. También Esch hubiera preferido que no le dejaran solo en compañía de Korn: todavía se agitaba en su alma un resto de esperanza de que ellos pudieran restituirle lo que había sentido allá, bajo la oscura arboleda, y que no había logrado descifrar aún. Claro que, por otra parte, estaba bien que huyeran de las tontas burlas de Korn y todavía habría sido mejor que se llevaran con ellos a Lohberg, pues Korn intentaba resarcirse a costa de Lohberg embromándole y procurando que el infeliz quebrara sus principios por medio de una ración de carne con cebolla y una jarra de cerveza. Pero el débil se mantuvo firme, dijo pausadamente: «Con la vida de los seres humanos no se juega», y no tocó ni la carne ni la cerveza, de modo que Korn, nuevamente decepcionado, y furioso además, tuvo que resignarse a ingerir él lo encargado, para que el camarero no se lo llevara intacto. Esch contemplaba el fondo oscuro de su jarra; era curioso que la salvación dependiera de que uno bebiera o no. Sin embargo, le estaba casi agradecido a aquel idiota obtuso de suaves modales. Lohberg permanecía sentado en silencio, sonriendo, y de vez en cuando uno imaginaba que iban a brotar lágrimas de sus grandes ojos blancos. Pero cuando los miembros del Ejército de Salvación, en sus idas y venidas por entre las mesas, se acercaron de nuevo a ellos, se puso en pie y pareció como si fuera a gritarles algo. Mas no lo hizo, en contra de lo que cabía esperar, sino que simplemente se quedó de pie. De pronto, sin más ni más, dijo una palabra carente de sentido, incomprensible para todos los que la oyeron; en voz muy alta y clara dijo: «Redención», y luego volvió a sentarse. Korn miró a Esch y Esch miró a Korn. Pero cuando Korn se llevó un dedo a la frente, para indicar con un movimiento circular el estado mental de Lohberg, la imagen cambió de modo altamente extraño y alarmante, y pareció que la palabra «redención» flotara liberada por encima de las mesas, retenida y no obstante liberada por un mecanismo invisible y giratorio, liberada también por los labios que la habían pronunciado. Y aunque el desprecio por el idiota no disminuyera ni un ápice, parecía que el reino de la redención existía, podía existir, debía existir, aunque solo fuera porque Korn, aquel pedazo de bestia muerta de anchas posaderas que estaba sentado en la Thomasbräu, era incapaz de pensar hasta la próxima esquina, y no digamos los confines de la libertad redimida. Y, pese a que Esch no por eso iba a transformarse en un dechado de virtudes, sino que golpeó la mesa con la jarra para pedir otra cerveza, sin embargo se quedó silencioso igual que Lohberg, y cuando Korn, tras levantarse todos de la mesa, propuso ir en busca de mujeres con el casto José, Esch se negó a acompañarlo hoy, dejó plantado en la calle al chasqueado Balthasar Korn y acompañó a su casa al comerciante de tabacos, oyendo con gran satisfacción tras de sí los improperios que les lanzaba Korn. Había cesado de nevar y, en el cálido viento que se había levantado, flotaban las feas palabras como vaporosas cintas primaverales.

En esta tribulación especial que se apodera de todo ser humano cuando dejada atrás la niñez, empieza a darse cuenta de que deberá acudir solo, rotos todos los puentes, al encuentro de su muerte única y exclusiva, en esa tribulación especial que en realidad hay que llamar ya temor de Dios, el hombre busca una compañía para poder, cogido de la mano de otro, avanzar hacia el oscuro portalón, y cuando la experiencia le ha enseñado cuán innegablemente delicioso es acostarse con otro ser humano, piensa que esta íntima unión de la piel puede durar hasta la tumba: aunque muchas cosas parezcan repugnantes, porque tienen lugar entre sábanas ordinarias y mal tendidas, o porque se podría creer que a una chica solo le interesa ser protegida por un hombre en los últimos años de su vida, sin embargo no se debe olvidar nunca que cualquier ser humano, aunque tenga la piel amarilla, sea pequeño y canijo y le falte visiblemente un diente arriba a la izquierda, invoca con sus gritos, a pesar del agujero dental, aquel amor que lo debe preservar de la muerte por la eternidad, de un miedo a la muerte que diariamente desciende con la noche sobre la criatura que duerme en soledad, un miedo que lo lame y lo envuelve como una llama, en el momento en que se despoja de sus ropas, como lo está haciendo ahora la señorita Erna: se desabrochó el descolorido corpiño de terciopelo rojo y dejó caer al suelo la falda de color verde oscuro, así como la enagua. También se quitó los zapatos; en cambio, conservó puestas las medias y el refajo blanco almidonado, sí, no acababa de decidirse a desabrocharse el corsé. Tenía miedo, pero ocultaba el miedo tras una sonrisa astuta y, a la luz oscilante de la vela que ardía

sobre la mesilla de noche, se deslizó en la cama sin acabar de desnudarse.

No tardó mucho en oír los pasos de Esch en el vestíbulo; hacía mucho ruido, mucho más del que correspondía a las operaciones que realizaba. Tal vez eran incluso innecesarias tales operaciones, pues ¿para qué tenía que ir a buscar agua por segunda vez?, y el cubo no era tan pesado como para que se viera obligado a dejarlo en el suelo con tanto ruido, y precisamente ante la puerta de Erna. Cada vez que la señorita Erna le oía, no quería ser menos y también hacía ruido: se acomodaba en la cama chirriante, chocaba adrede contra la pared y, como si estuviera medio dormida, suspiraba: «¡Dios mío!», y recurría también a la tos y al carraspeo. Pero Esch era un hombre de comportamiento impulsivo y, tras haberse comunicado telegráficamente un rato con Erna de este modo, entró decidido en la habitación de la mujer.

Ahí estaba la señorita Erna, en su cama, y sonreía pícara y maligna, pero al mismo tiempo amable, mostrando el hueco donde le faltaba un diente. En realidad a él no le gustaba. De todos modos, hizo caso omiso de sus amonestaciones: «Pero, señor Esch, haga usted el favor de salir inmediatamente», y permaneció tranquilamente en la habitación, y no lo hizo solamente porque era una persona de grosera sensualidad, como la inmensa mayoría de los hombres; no lo hizo solamente porque dos personas de distinto sexo que conviven bajo un mismo techo apenas pueden escapar a la mecánica de su corporalidad y se rinden a ella irreflexivamente con la consideración «¿y por qué no?»; no lo hizo solamente porque intuía lo mismo en ella y no tomaba en cuenta sus amonestaciones; no lo hizo desde luego únicamente por seguir el impulso de sus bajos instintos, aun cuando entre estos se pudieran contar también los celos, que se despiertan en cualquier hombre cada vez que ve a una muchacha coqueteando con un tipo como el señor Gernerth, sino que para el hombre Esch era también un hecho que el placer que todo hombre cree buscar como un fin en sí mismo obedece a una finalidad superior, que él apenas intuye pero que sin embargo le domina, y que no es otra cosa que el propósito de aturdir aquel miedo poderoso que va más allá de sí mismo, aunque a veces parezca ser únicamente el miedo que se apodera del viajante de comercio, cuando se acuesta en una solitaria cama de hotel, lejos de la mujer y de los hijos; miedo y placer del viajante, que se acuesta con una camarera fea y avejentada, empleando a veces desgarradoras obscenidades y sintiendo muy a menudo remordimientos. Esch, naturalmente, al dejar violentamente el cubo en el suelo, no pensaba en la soledad que había caído de nuevo sobre él desde que abandonó Colonia, no pensaba tampoco en la soledad que reinaba en el escenario momentos antes de que Teltscher hiciera silbar sus rutilantes cuchillos. Pero ahora, al sentarse al borde de la cama de la señorita Erna e inclinarse sobre ella deseándola, quería algo más de lo que se supone anhela un hombre en el ardor del deseo, porque detrás de lo aparentemente tan palpable, y tan vulgar, se esconde siempre la nostalgia, la nostalgia del alma prisionera que busca la redención de su soledad por medio de una salvación que valía para él y para ella, sí, quizá para todos los hombres y desde luego también para Ilona, una salvación que la mujer Erna no le podía procurar, porque ni ella ni él sabían qué era lo que él buscaba. Por eso la cólera que le invadió cuando ella no le permitió llegar al final y lo rechazó suavemente con las palabras «Cuando seamos marido y mujer», y no fue solo la cólera propia del hombre despechado ni el enfado de haber descubierto la mascarada de la vestimenta de ella; era algo más, era desesperación lo que traslucían sus palabras, aunque tuvieran apariencia de algo noble, cuando, desengañado, replicó: «Bueno, pues no». Y aunque para él la negativa fue como una advertencia de Dios señalándole la castidad, salió inmediatamente de la casa en busca de una muchacha más complaciente. Esto mortificó a Erna.

Desde aquella noche hubo entre Esch y la señorita Erna una guerra abierta. Ella no dejaba escapar ninguna oportunidad para excitar el deseo de Esch, y él aprovechaba cualquier pretexto para intentar llevar a la cama a la recalcitrante sin promesa de casamiento. Las hostilidades se iniciaban por la mañana, cuando ella le llevaba el desayuno a la habitación apenas terminaba él de vestirse, concupiscente atención maternal que le llenaba de furor, y terminaban por la noche, tanto si ella cerraba su cuarto como si le permitía entrar en él. Ninguno de los dos pronunciaba nunca la palabra «amor» y, aunque no estalló entre ambos un odio declarado sino que se limitaban a intercambiar bromas malignas, se debía a que todavía no se habían poseído mutuamente.

Esch pensaba a menudo que con Ilona hubiera sido distinto y mejor, pero, por extraño que parezca, no se atrevía ni a rozarla con el pensamiento. Ilona era algo superior, como lo era también, en cierto modo, el presidente Bertrand. Y a Esch no le ofendió que una de las bromas de Erna consistiera en impedir que él se comunicara con Ilona, antes al contrario, le parecía bien, aunque le exasperaban los chuscos aspavientos y las irónicas burlas. Ahora Ilona iba casi todos los días a la casa, y entre ella y Erna había nacido una especie de amistad. Lo que ambas pudieran tener en común era un misterio para Esch: cuando él llegaba a casa y percibía el barato y penetrante perfume de Ilona, que siempre le excitaba, encontraba a las dos mujeres sumidas en un extraño y mudo diálogo: Ilona no había aprendido ni una palabra más de alemán y la señorita Erna tenía que conformarse con acariciar a su amiga, colocarla frente al espejo y toquetear con admiración su peinado y sus vestidos. Esch se sentía casi siempre excluido. Erna parecía querer ocultarle incluso la presencia de su amiga. Una noche en que estaba sentado inocentemente en su cuarto, sonó la campanilla de la puerta.

Oyó que Erna abría, y no habría sospechado nada, si de pronto no hubiera girado la llave de su puerta. Se abalanzó hacia ella: ¡estaba cerrada! ¡Aquella mujerzuela lo había encerrado! Y aunque de suyo habría tenido que ignorar aquella broma tonta, el impulso de rebeldía fue más fuerte que él y empezó a gritar desaforadamente y a golpear la puerta, hasta que por fin la señorita Erna abrió y se deslizó en el cuarto con una sonrisita de conejo. «Bien», dijo, «ahora me puedo dedicar a usted… Tenemos visita, pero ya se ocupa de ella Balthasar.» Esch escapó furioso de allí.

Una noche que llegó tarde a casa, percibió de nuevo en la entrada su perfume. O sea que ella había estado otra vez allí, o estaba todavía, porque acababa de descubrir su sombrero colgado en la percha. Pero ¿dónde se escondía? La sala estaba a oscuras. En la estancia contigua se oía a Korn que roncaba. ¡Ella no se habría ido sin sombrero! Atisbó ante la puerta de Erna; tuvo la deprimente e inquietante idea de que las dos mujeres estaban juntas en la cama. Oprimió el picaporte con sumo cuidado; la puerta no cedió, estaba con el cerrojo echado, como siempre que la señorita Erna deseaba realmente dormir. Esch se encogió de hombros y se dirigió a su cuarto haciendo mucho ruido. Pero no podía permanecer en cama; miró en la sala; el perfume flotaba todavía en el aire y el sombrero seguía en la percha. Algo no marchaba bien, estaba seguro, y Esch recorrió la casa sigilosamente. De pronto le pareció percibir un susurro en la habitación de Korn; desde luego, Korn no era de esos tipos que suelen susurrar, y Esch escuchó con mayor atención: Korn gemía, gemía sin lugar a dudas, y Esch, un hombre que nada podía temer de una persona como Korn, salió huyendo descalzo hacia su cuarto, como si algo horrible le persiguiera. Hubiera querido taparse los oídos.

Por la mañana Erna le despertó de un sueño pesado y, antes de que él pudiera preguntar nada, le dijo: «¡Pst, una sorpresa. ¡Levántese!». Esch se vistió a toda prisa y, cuando entró en la cocina donde Erna estaba ocupada en sus quehaceres, ella le tomó de la mano y le condujo de puntillas a su habitación, entreabrió ligeramente la puerta y con un gesto le indicó que mirase dentro. Allí vio a Ilona: dejaba colgar fuera de la cama el brazo muy blanco, todavía sin ninguna herida de cuchillo; en su rostro, un poco hinchado, se destacaban las oscuras bolsas de debajo de los ojos, y dormía.

Desde aquel día Ilona aparecía con frecuencia a altas horas de la noche y pasó relativamente bastante tiempo hasta que Esch comprendió que Ilona pasaba la noche con Balthasar Korn, y que Erna, por así decirlo, encubría con su propio cuerpo los amores de su hermano.

Martin le visitó en su oficina del almacén. Era curioso comprobar que aquel proscrito, que parecía tener que ser expulsado por cualquier portero de empresa que respetase las órdenes, encontrase siempre la forma de entrar y, sin ocultarse lo más mínimo, con absoluta tranquilidad, se pasease por los talleres oscilando sobre sus muletas, sin que nadie le detuviera, recibiendo incluso amables saludos por parte de muchos; probablemente se debía también a que nadie se atreve a meterse con un lisiado. Precisamente en su trabajo a Esch no le hacía ninguna falta el secretario del sindicato; Martin hubiese podido esperarle perfectamente fuera, pero, por otra parte, era un hombre en quien se podía confiar: sabía cuándo podía venir y cuándo debía alejarse; era un tipo decente. «Buenos días, August», le saludó con sencillez. «Solo quería saber cómo te van las cosas. Estás muy bien aquí; has ganado con el cambio.» ¿Acaso el tullido quería recordarle que debía estarle agradecido por este maldito Mannheim? De todos modos, no se podía hacer responsable a Martin por el asunto surgido entre Korn e Ilona; así que Esch, si bien de mal talante, respondió que sí, que había sido un buen cambio. Y era verdad, en cierto modo. Pues ahora que Martin le hacía recordar su anterior trabajo y Nentwig, Esch se sentía feliz de haber perdido de vista Colonia. Seguía manteniendo en secreto la mala acción de Nentwig, como si él hubiera sido su cómplice, y el hecho de poderse encontrar en cualquier esquina con aquel pillastre le quitaba todas las ganas de regresar allá. Colonia o Mannheim, en realidad daba igual… ¿Dónde debería uno vivir para verse libre de tanta porquería? No obstante, preguntó a Martin qué novedades había en Colonia. «Más tarde», contestó Martin. «Ahora no tengo tiempo. ¿Dónde almorzarás?» Y en cuanto lo supo, se alejó aprisa con andares de pato.

Esch, a pesar de todo, se alegraba de aquel reencuentro y, como era un hombre impaciente, se le hizo muy larga la espera hasta el mediodía. Durante la noche había llegado la primavera y Esch dejó su chaqueta en el almacén. El pavimento brillaba al sol del mediodía con alegres reflejos entre los cobertizos, y había surgido de pronto la hierba, tierna y fresca, en las esquinas de las edificaciones, entre las piedras. El cálido sol del mediodía calentaba el ambiente. Al pasar por delante de las rampas de carga y descarga, pasó la mano por los rebordes de hierro que recubrían los extremos de las planchas ásperas de madera, y también el hierro estaba caliente. Caso de no ser trasladado a Colonia tendría que hacerse traer pronto su bicicleta. Se respiraba profundamente, con facilidad, y la comida tenía un sabor distinto, tal vez porque las ventanas del restaurante estaban abiertas. Martin le contó que había venido a causa de una huelga; de no ser por eso, habría tardado más tiempo. Pero en las fábricas del sur de Alemania y en las de Alsacia estaba ocurriendo algo y estas cosas trascienden enseguida.

—Por mí, pueden hacer todas las huelgas que quieran, pero nosotros debemos mantener la calma. Una huelga de transportistas sería hoy una auténtica locura… Somos un sindicato pobre y de la central no puede

esperarse ni un céntimo… Sería una bonita manera de echarlo todo a rodar. Naturalmente no se puede contar con los navegantes; cuando un mulo de esos se empeña en ir a la huelga, ni el diablo puede evitarlo. A mí, tarde o temprano, me matarán a golpes. —Decía todo esto sin amargura, con aire benévolo—. Ahora ya me gritan otra vez que estoy pagado por los armadores.

—¿Por Bertrand? —preguntó Esch interesado.

—Evidentemente, también por Bertrand.

—Qué cerdo —exclamó Esch.

Martin se rió:

—¿Bertrand? Es un hombre dignísimo.

—Vaya, vaya, con que un hombre dignísimo… ¿Es verdad que es un oficial renegado?

—Sí, parece que abandonó la carrera militar. Y eso no hace más que hablar a favor del hombre.

¿O sea que esto hablaba a favor del hombre? No había nada claro, pensó Esch furioso, nada estaba claro, ni siquiera en un día tan hermoso de primavera.

—Yo solo quisiera saber por qué sigues ocupándote de estas cosas.

—Cada uno se encuentra en el lugar donde Dios le ha puesto —dijo Martin, y su cara de niño envejecido adquirió una expresión de piedad.

Después le transmitió a Esch saludos de mamá Hentjen y añadió que todos esperaban con alegría que Esch les visitara pronto.

Después de comer se dirigieron a la tienda de Lohberg. Les sobraba un poco de tiempo y Martin descansó en la maciza silla de roble que estaba frente al mostrador y que era tan sólida y limpia como todo lo que había en el local. Martin, habituado a mirar cualquier papel impreso que se pusiera a su alcance, hojeó las revistas suizas antialcohólicas y vegetarianas.

—¡Diantre! —exclamó—. He aquí casi a un correligionario. —Lohberg se sintió halagado, pero Esch le agrió la alegría—: Sí, pertenece a la cofradía de los hermanos de la limonada. —Y, para anonadarle aún más, añadió—: ¡Geyring tiene hoy una gran reunión, pero una reunión auténtica, nada de Ejército de Salvación!

—Por desgracia —comentó Martin.

Lohberg, que sentía una debilidad por las reuniones públicas y por los discursos, propuso inmediatamente asistir.

—Déjelo para otra ocasión —dijo Martin—. Esch, por lo menos, no debe acudir, pues podría perjudicarle que le vieran allí. Además, puede que las cosas se compliquen.

Esch no temía precisamente poner en peligro su empleo, pero, cosa extraña, el asistir a la reunión le parecía casi una traición respecto a Bertrand. Lohberg, en cambio, dijo en tono audaz: «Yo iré de todos modos», y Esch se sintió avergonzado por el hermano de la limonada: no, no era posible abandonar a un amigo que estaba en peligro, y, si lo hacía, jamás podría presentarse de nuevo ante mamá Hentjen. No obstante, se calló lo que había decidido. Martin explicó: «Creo que los armadores nos enviarán algunos agentes provocadores; a ellos les conviene mucho que se produzca una huelga salvaje». Y aunque Nentwig no era armador, sino el obeso administrador de un negocio de vinos, a Esch le dio la impresión que aquel malvado había metido su gordinflona mano en este pérfido asunto.

La reunión, como de costumbre, tuvo lugar en la sala de una pequeña taberna. Ante la puerta había unos policías que examinaban a los que entraban, y estos fingían no reparar en los agentes del orden. Esch llegó tarde; cuando se disponía a entrar, alguien le dio una palmadita en el hombro y, al volverse, se encontró con el inspector encargado de la vigilancia del puerto: «¿Qué le trae por aquí, señor Esch?». Esch recobró el dominio inmediatamente. En realidad, simple curiosidad; se había enterado de que Geyring, el secretario del sindicato, a quien él había conocido en Colonia, iba a hablar aquí, y como él en cierta manera pertenecía al ramo, le interesaba todo aquello. «Yo no se lo aconsejo, señor Esch», dijo el inspector, «precisamente porque usted pertenece al ramo, como acaba de decir; aquí la cosa está que arde y en nada puede beneficiarle quedarse.» «Quiero echar un vistazo», resolvió Esch, y entró.

La sala de bajo techo, adornada con retratos del emperador, del gran duque de Baden y del rey de Würtemberg, estaba de bote en bote. En el estrado había una mesa cubierta con un paño blanco y detrás de ella cuatro hombres sentados; uno de ellos era Martin. Esch, con un poco de envidia al principio por no poder ocupar él también un lugar destacado, se sorprendió de haber notado siquiera la existencia de la mesa, dado el ruidoso caos que reinaba en la sala. Y pasó un buen rato hasta que vio que un hombre se había subido a una silla en mitad de la sala y soltaba un discurso ininteligible, subrayando cada palabra —le gustaba sobre todo la palabra «demagogo»— con un gesto grandilocuente, como arrojándola contra la mesa del estrado. Era una especie de diálogo desigual, ya que la respuesta de la mesa era solo el tintineo de una campanilla a la que nadie hacía caso, pero que al fin se impuso, cuando Martin, apoyado en el respaldo de la silla y en las muletas, se levantó y acalló el griterío. En realidad no se entendía bien lo que estaba diciendo, con aquel tono algo cansado, rutinario e irónico del típico orador habituado a reuniones públicas, pero Esch se dio cuenta de que Martin valía más que todos los que vociferaban a su alrededor. Casi parecía que a Martin no le importara hacerse escuchar, pues de pronto se calló y aguantó impertérrito las imprecaciones de: «vendido a los

capitalistas», «cerdo estatal», «socialista imperial», hasta que entre todos los silbidos se oyó uno más penetrante… y en medio del repentino silencio subió al estrado un oficial de la policía y dijo brevemente: «En nombre de la ley, se suspende la asamblea. Despejen la sala». Y mientras Esch era empujado a través de la puerta por los que querían salir, tuvo tiempo de ver que el oficial se dirigía a Martin.

Como obedeciendo una consigna, se precipitaron casi todos hacia la salida trasera del local. Desde luego no les sirvió de nada, pues entretanto la policía había rodeado completamente la casa, y todos tuvieron que identificarse o ir a la comisaría. En la entrada principal el tumulto era menor; Esch tuvo la suerte de encontrarse de nuevo con el inspector del puerto y pudo decirle rápidamente: «Tenía usted razón; una vez y no más», y así escapó al registro que hacía la policía. Pero la cosa no había terminado. La gente se quedó frente al local; se comportaban con moderación y solo proferían de vez en cuando gritos de protesta contra el comité, el sindicato y Geyring. Pero de pronto corrió el rumor de que los del comité y Geyring habían sido arrestados, y solo se esperaba a que la gente se marchara, para llevárselos. Entonces se produjo una conmoción general: Todos empezaron a silbar y parecía que la multitud iba a arremeter contra la policía. El amable inspector de policía, junto al que Esch se había quedado, le dio un golpecito: «Ahora sí tiene usted que esfumarse, señor Esch», y Esch, viendo que nada podía hacer allí, se retiró hasta la esquina más próxima, con la esperanza de encontrar a Lohberg en alguna parte.

Ante el local, el tumulto duró todavía un buen rato. Después aparecieron seis policías a caballo y, como estos animales, aunque dóciles, son también un poco locos, y por eso ejercen una influencia mágica sobre muchas personas, este pequeño refuerzo hípico fue decisivo. Esch vio todavía que varios obreros, con las manos esposadas y entre el silencio asustado de los demás, eran escoltados por la policía, y luego la calle quedó vacía. Donde había todavía un par de personas juntas, estas eran dispersadas bruscamente por los policías, ahora impacientes y brutales, y Esch, suponiendo con fundamento que a él no le tratarían con mayor consideración, despejó el campo.

Fue a la tienda de Lohberg. No había regresado aún, y Esch esperó de pie junto a la puerta, en la cálida noche primaveral. Ojalá no se hubieran llevado también a Lohberg con las manos esposadas. Aunque, en realidad, hubiera sido en cierto modo divertido. ¡Lo que diría Erna, si viera encadenado a aquel dechado de virtudes! Cuando Esch se disponía ya a abandonar la espera, apareció Lohberg, terriblemente excitado y casi llorando. Nunca le había pasado nada igual. Y había sido terrible. Poco a poco y de forma muy confusa supo Esch que la reunión se había desarrollado, al principio, con toda normalidad, aunque le habían gritado al señor Geyring, que había hablado muy bien, toda clase de asquerosidades. Luego se había levantado un tipo que evidentemente era uno de los agentes *provocateurs* de que el propio señor Geyring había hecho mención al mediodía, y había pronunciado un discurso tremendo contra los propietarios, contra el Estado y contra el propio emperador, de modo que el oficial de policía había amenazado con disolver la reunión si continuaba en aquel tono. En forma incomprensible, el señor Geyring, que debía saber perfectamente qué clase de pájaro era aquel individuo, no lo había desenmascarado como *agent provocateur*, sino que le protegió incluso y exigió que se le permitiera hablar. Entonces la cosa se puso naturalmente cada vez más fea y por fin la reunión fue disuelta. Los del comité y Geyring habían sido efectivamente detenidos: lo podía afirmar con plena certeza, pues había sido uno de los últimos en abandonar la sala.

Esch estaba desconcertado, en realidad más desconcertado de lo que quería admitir. Solo sabía que debía beber algo, beber vino, a fin de poner orden en el mundo: Martin, que estaba en contra de la huelga, había sido arrestado, arrestado por una policía que estaba de parte de los armadores y de un oficial renegado, una policía que arremetía bárbaramente contra un inocente… ¡tal vez porque se le había quedado a deber la cabeza de Nentwig! Y, sin embargo, el inspector del puerto se había comportado muy amablemente con él, e incluso le había protegido. Esch sintió de pronto una profunda cólera contra Lohberg; aquel maldito idiota con su eterna limonada estaba probablemente consternado solo porque esperaba una reunión pobre y edificante y no comprendía que las cosas podían ponerse muy duras. Aquella manía de constituir asociaciones le pareció de pronto a Esch nauseabunda: ¿para qué tantas asociaciones? No hacen más que cimentar el desorden y son probablemente las que provocan todo esto. De mal talante, la emprendió contra Lohberg: «Llévese de aquí esta maldita limonada o se la tiro al suelo… Si bebiera usted vino de verdad, al menos sería capaz de dar explicaciones más sensatas». Pero Lohberg se limitó a mirarle con ojos muy abiertos, en cuyo blanco se destacaban unas venitas rojas, y desde luego era totalmente incapaz de hallar una solución a las dudas de Esch, dudas que se acrecentaron a la mañana siguiente, cuando se supo que los cargadores y navegantes habían suspendido el trabajo en señal de protesta por la detención de Geyring, secretario de su sindicato. El ministerio público había presentado contra Geyring una acusación por el delito de incitar a la rebelión.

Durante la representación, Esch estuvo sentado con Gernerth en la llamada oficina de la dirección, que le recordaba siempre su jaula acristalada del almacén. Allá fuera trabajaban Teltscher e Ilona, y Esch oía cómo se clavaban los silbantes cuchillos en la tabla negra. Sobre el escritorio había una cajita blanca que tenía pintada una cruz ginebrina y debía de contener el botiquín. Seguro que en ella no había ni siquiera vendas y

que nadie la había abierto desde hacía años, pero Esch estaba convencido de que Ilona entraría de un momento a otro para vendarse sus sangrantes heridas. En lugar de Ilona entró Teltscher, algo sudoroso y con aire muy satisfecho; se secó las manos con el pañuelo y dijo: «Un trabajo de primera clase, un trabajo de gran mérito… lo cual significa una buena remuneración». Gernerth echaba cuentas en su bloc de notas: alquiler de la sala, 22 marcos; impuestos, 16 marcos; iluminación, 4 marcos; honorarios… «No me importune más con todo esto», dijo Teltscher, «me lo sé de memoria… He invertido cuatro mil coronas en el negocio, y no las veré nunca más… A mí me tenía que pasar esto… Señor Esch, ¿conoce usted a alguien que me pudiera sacar de este lío? Un veinte por ciento de rebaja y a usted el diez en concepto de comisión.» Esch conocía de sobras estos estallidos y ofertas, por eso no le causaban ya ningún efecto, si bien habría ofrecido a Teltscher lo que fuera con tal de hacerle desaparecer, a él y a Ilona.

Esch estaba de mal humor. Desde que encarcelaron a Martin la vida se había oscurecido en sus cimientos: no tenía importancia que las escaramuzas con Erna se hubieran hecho insoportables y francamente molestas, pero que Bertrand se hubiera aliado con la policía y que la policía se hubiera comportado de forma tan vil era más que suficiente para exasperarle a uno, y la relación entre Ilona y Korn, que ninguno de los dos, ni tampoco Erna, se esforzaban ya en ocultar, resultaba repugnante. Era nauseabundo. No quería ni pensar en ello; pero Ilona era un ser superior. Sí, lo mejor sería no saber nada más de ella y perderla de vista para siempre. Igual que al presidente Bertrand y su Mittelrheinische. Esch lo vio claramente en el momento en que entró Ilona, ya vestida de calle, y se sentó muda y seria, sin que ninguno de los hombres le prestara atención. Ahora aparecería enseguida Korn a buscarla; entraba y salía allí como Pedro por su casa.

Ilona se había enamorado sinceramente del corpulento Balthasar Korn, tal vez porque le recordaba algún amor de juventud con algún suboficial del ejército, o tal vez simplemente porque Korn era totalmente distinto a aquel Teltscher débil, hábil, indiferente y duro de corazón, no obstante, en su misma debilidad. Desde luego Esch no quería devanarse los sesos pensando en esa cuestión; ya era bastante que una mujer, a la que él mismo había renunciado porque estaba destinada a algo superior, fuera degradada por un tipo como Korn. Lo que resultaba inexplicable era la conducta de Teltscher. El tal individuo era sin duda un rufián, pero esto no molestaba a nadie. Además todo el asunto no podía beneficiar mucho a Teltscher: Korn no reparaba en gastos e Ilona, con el vestido nuevo que él le acababa de regalar, tenía un aspecto espléndido, tan espléndido que la señorita Erna ya no secundaba la costosa pasión amorosa de su hermano con la misma benevolencia que al principio, pero Ilona no quería aceptar un solo céntimo de Korn y él tenía que imponerle a la fuerza sus regalos; tanto le amaba ella.

Korn cruzó la puerta e Ilona se abrazó a su pecho uniformado con cariñosas palabras de lengua del este. ¡No, aquello no se podía soportar! Teltscher rió: «Ella tiene que divertirse», y mientras se alejaban los dos, Teltscher le gritó a ella unas palabras en húngaro, evidentemente malignas, que le valieron no solo una mirada llena de odio por parte de Ilona, sino también la amenaza por parte de Korn, dicha medio en serio y medio en broma, de que algún día mataría a ese judío lanzador de cuchillos. Teltscher no hizo el mínimo caso, sino que volvió a sus reflexiones de negocios:

—Tenemos que presentar algún número que no resulte caro y que atraiga al público.

—Vaya sensacional descubrimiento ha hecho el señor Teltscher-Teltini —dijo Gernerth, y siguió con las cuentas de su bloc. Después levantó los ojos—: ¿Qué les parecería un espectáculo de lucha femenina?

Teltscher silbó entre dientes:

—La idea merece ser tenida en cuenta. Claro que sin algo de dinero tampoco se puede llevar a la práctica.

Gernerth garrapateó unas cifras:

—Se necesita un poco de dinero, no mucho. Las mujeres salen baratas. También se necesitarían unas mallas… Habría que interesar a alguien en el asunto.

—Yo las entrenaría —dijo Teltscher—, y también podría hacer de árbitro. Pero ¿en Mannheim? —hizo una mueca despectiva—. Como si no se viera de qué modo marchan aquí los negocios. ¿Qué piensa usted de esto, Esch?

Esch no tenía una opinión definida, pero de pronto abrigó la esperanza de que, si se trasladaba el espectáculo, Ilona podría ser liberada de las garras de Korn. Y, como Colonia era el lugar más cercano, dijo que aquella ciudad le parecía el lugar más apropiado para números de lucha; el año anterior los hubo en el circo, desde luego hechos en serio, y tuvieron éxito. «También nosotros lo haríamos en serio», dijo Teltscher lleno de buenos propósitos. Hablaron todavía mucho tiempo de unas cosas y otras, hasta que finalmente se encargó a Esch que, en su inminente visita a Colonia, se pusiera en contacto con el agente teatral Oppenheimer, a quien Gernerth habría escrito entretanto. Y si Esch lograba además reunir algún dinero para el proyecto, esto no sería solo una prueba de amistad, sino que le proporcionaría también un beneficio.

Esch no conocía de momento a nadie que pudiera aportar dinero. Pero para sus adentros pensó en Lohberg, que podía ser considerado casi como un hombre rico. ¿Podría un casto José sentir algún interés por los combates de mujeres?

Aunque con las detenciones efectuadas, los trabajadores del puerto y los navegantes habían perdido a casi todos sus dirigentes, la huelga continuaba desde hacía ya diez días. Había algunos trabajadores voluntarios, pero como no bastaban para las tareas de carga y descarga ferroviarias, y la navegación estaba en parte paralizada, se les empleaba solo en los trabajos más urgentes. En los almacenes reinaba una tranquilidad dominical. Esch estaba de mal humor, porque probablemente no le sacarían de allí antes de que terminara la huelga, y vagaba ocioso por el almacén, se rascaba la espalda contra los quicios de las puertas y finalmente escribió a mamá Hentjen. Le contó los acontecimientos relacionados con el encarcelamiento de Martin, le habló de Lohberg, pero no le dijo nada de Erna y de Korn, pues esta historia le repugnaba. Después compró otra vez varias postales y las envió a diferentes muchachas con las que se había acostado en los últimos años y cuyos nombres recordaba. Fuera, en la sombra, se hallaban los contramaestres y los jefes de almacén, y tras las puertas correderas medio abiertas de un vagón de mercancías vacío se jugaba a las cartas; Esch pensó a quién más debía escribir e intentó contar el número de mujeres que había poseído hasta el momento presente. Al no conseguirlo, le pareció que tenía entre manos una inservible lista del almacén, y, para ponerlo en claro, empezó a anotar los nombres en un papel, poniendo al lado mes y año. Después echó la suma y se sintió satisfecho, sobre todo cuando apareció Korn y como de costumbre, empezó de nuevo a decir que Ilona era una mujer estupenda, una húngara ardiente. Esch se guardó la lista en el bolsillo y dejó hablar a Korn; de todos modos no podría seguir hablando mucho tiempo. En cuanto terminara la huelga, el señor inspector de aduanas ya podía empezar a correr tras su Ilona hasta Colonia, o más lejos todavía, hasta el fin del mundo. Y casi le dio pena aquel infeliz porque no sabía lo que le esperaba; Balthasar Korn siguió pavoneándose despreocupadamente de su conquista y cuando hubo charlado lo bastante sobre Ilona, sacó un juego de naipes. Con espíritu fraternal, buscaron a un tercero y jugaron a cartas todo el día.

Al anochecer Esch fue a la tienda de Lohberg, y lo encontró sentado, con un cigarrillo en los labios, sumido en la lectura de sus revistas vegetarianas. Las puso a un lado al entrar Esch y empezó a hablar de Martin:

—El mundo está envenenado —dijo—, no solo con nicotina y con alcohol y con alimentación animal, sino con un veneno peor, que apenas conocemos… Lleno de tumores que revientan.

Tenía los ojos húmedos y febriles; daba la impresión de estar enfermo; era muy posible que realmente algún veneno minara su cuerpo. Esch, delgado pero fuerte, de pie ante él, con la cabeza vacía de tanto jugar a las cartas, no comprendía el sentido de aquella perorata idiota, apenas comprendió que hacía referencia a la detención de Martin; todo yacía envuelto en una absurda neblina y solo quedaba claro que era necesario interesar al otro en la participación en el negocio teatral. A Esch no le gustaba andarse con rodeos:

—¿Quiere usted participar en el negocio teatral de Gernerth?

A Lohberg la pregunta le cogió totalmente de sorpresa y, con los ojos muy abiertos, se limitó a decir:

—¿Cómo?

—Sí, que si quiere formar parte del negocio teatral.

—Pero yo tengo ya mi negocio de tabacos.

—Usted ha dicho en repetidas ocasiones que no le gusta, y por eso pensé que sería más feliz en otro negocio.

Lohberg movió la cabeza:

—Mientras viva mi madre, he de seguir con la tienda. La mitad le pertenece a ella.

—Lástima —dijo Esch—. Teltscher cree que con espectáculos de lucha femenina se podría ganar el ciento por ciento.

Lohberg no preguntó qué era aquello de «lucha femenina», sino que se limitó a repetir:

—Lástima.

—Yo estoy también harto de mi trabajo —siguió Esch—. Ahora están en huelga; da asco verlos deambular tontamente de un lado a otro.

—¿Y qué quiere usted hacer? ¿Piensa dedicarse al teatro?

Esch reflexionó; el teatro significaba estar siempre con Gernerth y Teltscher en alguna polvorienta oficina de dirección. Las actrices, además, le repugnaban desde que se había movido entre bastidores; no eran muy distintas a Hede o a Thusnelda. En realidad, en un día como hoy, tan vacío, no sabía lo que quería. «Huir lejos», dijo, «a América.» En una revista ilustrada había visto fotografías de Nueva York; ahora le venían a la memoria; había también la fotografía de un combate de boxeo en América, y esto le hizo pensar de nuevo en las luchas femeninas.

—Si pudiera ganar rápidamente el dinero para el viaje, me iría enseguida.

Él mismo se sorprendió de estar concibiendo aquella idea en serio y, muy en serio, empezó a echar cuentas: tenía casi trescientos marcos; si los invertía en el negocio de las luchas, podría en efecto aumentarlos, y ¿por qué un hombre como él, fuerte, capaz de trabajar, con mucha práctica en contabilidad, no podía intentar en América lo mismo que aquí? Por lo menos vería algo de mundo. Tal vez entonces Teltscher e Ilona tendrían el contrato neoyorquino del que Teltscher hablaba siempre. Lohberg interrumpió el hilo de sus pensamientos: «Precisamente usted sabe idiomas, cosa que a mí me falta». Esch asintió satisfecho; sí, con el francés se defendería en cualquier parte y el inglés no tenía misterios… pero para participar en la financiación

de las luchas, no necesitaba Lohberg saber idiomas. «No, claro que no, pero sí para ir a América», opinó Lohberg. Y aunque para Lohberg resultaba inimaginable que alguien —y él menos que nadie— pudiera vivir en una ciudad que no fuera Mannheim, se fueron convirtiendo paulatinamente casi en compañeros de viaje y discutieron los gastos del pasaje y el modo de sufragarlos. La conversación, por un proceso natural y lógico, recayó de nuevo en los combates femeninos y, tras toda clase de reflexiones, Lohberg llegó a la conclusión de que podía disponer perfectamente de mil marcos para invertirlos en el negocio de Gernerth sin perjuicio del suyo. Desde luego esto no bastaba para adquirir la parte de Teltscher, pero era un buen principio, sobre todo si se añadían también los trescientos marcos de Esch.

El día terminó mejor de lo que había empezado. De regreso a su casa, iba Esch cavilando de qué modo podría encontrar el resto del dinero, y de pronto le vino a la mente la señorita Erna.

Por mucho que sedujera a Erna vincularse a Esch mediante lazos financieros, también en esto se mantuvo fiel a su principio de no otorgar nada como no fuera a su marido. Cuando ella le expuso torpemente lo que pensaba, Esch montó en cólera: ¿qué imaginaba de él?, ¿acaso que quería el dinero para sí mismo? Pero, en el mismo momento de decir esto, se dio cuenta de que en realidad no se trataba en absoluto del dinero y de que la señorita Erna era aún más injusta de lo que se hubiera podido hacer entender: naturalmente el dinero tenía que servir para rescatar a Ilona, naturalmente había que impedir solo que se echaran cuchillos sobre muchachas indefensas, naturalmente él no quería el dinero para sí, pero esto no era todo, porque además no quería saber nada de Ilona —de eso ni hablar, cuando eran otros los que aportaban el dinero—, y le pareció incluso bien tener que renunciar, ¡le importaba un comino Ilona! Él tenía otros proyectos más elevados, y con razón le ofendió que Erna le acusara de pensar únicamente en sí mismo; su grosera respuesta estuvo justificada: ella podía dejar las cosas como estaban y guardarse su maldito dinero. Pero Erna interpretó su rudeza como sentimiento de culpabilidad, se alegró de haberle pillado en falta y rezongó que conocía esos manejos, pues recordaba a cierto viajante de comercio que no solo había gozado de sus favores, sino que, además, le había causado la dolorosa pérdida de cincuenta marcos.

Desde luego era un buen día para la señorita Erna. Esch le había pedido algo que ella pudo negarle, y además llevaba zapatos nuevos, que le producían gran satisfacción y en los que se sentía cómoda. Se había sentado en el sofá y dejó asomar las puntas de los pies, moviéndolas, por debajo de los bordes del vestido, gesto que era provocador y burlón al mismo tiempo; el leve chasquido del cuero le hacía bien y daba una agradable sensación en los tobillos. Ella no tenía ganas de terminar aquella divertida conversación y, pese al rudo punto final que había puesto Esch, le preguntó de nuevo para qué quería tanto dinero. Esch respondió otra vez que podía guardarse su maldito dinero. Lohberg colaboraría gustosamente en el negocio teatral.

—¡Ah, el señor Lohberg! —exclamó la señorita Erna—. Él sí tiene recursos y puede permitírselo.

Y con esta peculiar obstinación que caracteriza al amor en determinadas ocasiones y en virtud de la cual la señorita Erna se hubiera entregado antes a un hombre que le resultara indiferente que al señor Esch, que solo podía conseguirla matrimonialmente, se sintió inclinada a incordiar a Esch y a ofrecer su dinero a Lohberg. Jugueteó de nuevo con las puntas de los pies:

—Sí, asociarse con el señor Lohberg sería otra cosa. Es un hombre de negocios muy formal.

—Es un idiota —dijo Esch, en parte por convicción y en parte por celos, celos que llenaron de satisfacción a la señorita Erna, pues precisamente lo que pretendía era suscitarlos.

—A usted no se lo doy —dijo tratando de hurgar en la herida.

Por curioso que parezca, esto no causó ningún efecto. ¿A él qué le importaba, en realidad? Había renunciado a Ilona y, de suyo, era Korn quien debía preocuparse de liberarla de los cuchillos. Esch contempló cómo Erna movía las puntas de los pies. Vaya cara pondría Erna si se le dijera que, en último término, debía entregar su dinero para Balthasar. Claro que con esto no se lograría nada. Tal vez el que debía pagar realmente era Nentwig. Porque si se quiere redimir el mundo, hay que atacar el centro del veneno, como decía Lohberg; el centro del veneno era Nentwig, o tal vez algo que se ocultaba detrás de Nentwig, algo más grande —tal vez algo tan grande y tan oculto como un presidente en su aislamiento inaccesible—, algo que uno no conocía. Todo esto podía sacar de sus casillas a cualquiera y Esch, aunque era un tipo fuerte y nada nervioso, sintió deseos de pisar los pies oscilantes de la señorita Erna para obligarla a estarse quieta.

—¿Le gustan mis zapatos? —preguntó ella.

—No —respondió Esch.

La señorita Erna se extrañó:

—Pues al señor Lohberg sí le gustarán… ¿Cuándo le traerá por aquí? Desde hace unos días usted lo tiene escondido… En resumidas cuentas, ¿es por celos, señor Esch?

¡Por favor! Podía traerlo inmediatamente, si ella tenía tantos deseos de verle, afirmó Esch, que esperaba que los dos se pusieran de acuerdo sobre el negocio.

—No es necesario que venga enseguida —dijo la señorita Erna—, puede venir por la noche a tomar café.

Bien, ya le transmitiría el recado, dijo Esch, y se marchó.

Lohberg acudió a la cita. Sostenía la taza de café en la mano y daba vueltas con la cucharilla mecánicamente. Hasta mientras bebía, dejó la cucharilla dentro de la taza, y le molestaba en la nariz. Esch estaba sentado con las piernas muy abiertas, y preguntó si iba a venir Balthasar con Ilona y otras cosas de mal gusto. La señorita Erna no le escuchaba. Miraba con interés la raquítica cabeza de Lohberg y aquellos grandes ojos en los que destacaba el blanco; su aspecto, en verdad, hacía pensar que a la más mínima se echaría a llorar. Y ella se preguntó si aquel hombre lloraría caso de sentirse enardecido de amor y de pasión. Pensó con enojo en su hermano, por haberla arrastrado a este desesperante asunto con Esch, un hombre grosero que la llenaba de inquietud, mientras que un par de casas más allá existía un comerciante digno, muy bien situado, que enrojecía cuando ella le miraba. ¿Habría conocido ya mujer? Por todas estas razones y para excitar a Esch, llevó la conversación con gran habilidad hacia el tema del amor:

—¿Es también usted un solterón empedernido, señor Lohberg? Ya se arrepentirá cuando sea viejo, se ponga enfermo y se encuentre sin nadie que le cuide.

Lohberg enrojeció:

—Estoy esperando únicamente encontrar la mujer adecuada, señorita Korn.

—¿Y no se ha presentado todavía? —dijo la señorita Erna con una sonrisa prometedora, mientras alargaba el pie por debajo del borde de la falda.

Lohberg dejó su taza en la mesa con expresión de total desconcierto.

—Él no lo ha probado aún —intervino Esch, rezumando veneno.

Lohberg recobró el equilibrio en sus convicciones:

—Solo se ama una vez, señorita Korn.

—¡Oh! —exclamó la señorita Erna.

Esto era claro e inequívoco. Esch casi se avergonzó de su vida impura y no le pareció improbable que hubiera sido ese grande y único amor el que había unido a mamá Hentjen con su esposo, y tal vez por eso ella exigía castidad y abstinencia en sus clientes. Y debía de ser terrible para mamá Hentjen tener que pagar la breve felicidad vivida con la renuncia a cualquier otro amor, y pensando en esto dijo:

—Muy bien, pero ¿qué pasa con las viudas? De acuerdo con esta teoría ninguna tendría derecho a seguir viviendo… Sobre todo si no tienen hijos… —y, como recordaba muchas cosas leídas en revistas, añadió—: A las viudas, en realidad, habría que quemarlas, a fin de…, a fin de, por así decirlo, redimirlas.

—Es usted un hombre terrible, señor Esch —dijo la señorita Erna—. El señor Lohberg no se permitiría ni siquiera pensar una cosa tan horrible.

—La redención está en Dios —dijo el señor Lohberg—. Aquel a quien Dios concede la gracia del amor, la conserva más allá de la muerte.

—Es usted un hombre inteligente, señor Lohberg, y más de uno debiera tener muy presentes sus hermosas palabras —dijo la señorita Erna—. ¡Y aún sería más hermoso que dejarse quemar por un hombre ideal! Una cosa como esta…

Esch la interrumpió:

—Si hubiera justicia, no se necesitarían sus estúpidas asociaciones para la redención… Sí, sí, sorpréndase —casi gritaba—, no se necesitaría ningún Ejército de Salvación si la policía encerrara a la gente que lo merece en lugar de encerrar a inocentes.

—Yo solo me casaría con un hombre que pudiera tener una buena pensión de jubilado o que pudiera dejar a su viuda lo necesario para vivir, una seguridad, por así decirlo —dijo la señorita Erna—. Una se ha merecido esta clase de hombre.

Esch sintió hacia ella un profundo desprecio. Mamá Hentjen jamás hablaría de este modo. Pero Lohberg dijo:

—Aquel que no deja bien claros sus asuntos antes de morir, es un mal padre de familia.

—Usted hará muy feliz a su esposa —dijo la señorita Erna.

Lohberg prosiguió:

—Si Dios me concede la suerte de hallar una compañera, confío en poder decir con toda seguridad que llevaremos un auténtico matrimonio cristiano. Nos apartaremos del mundo exterior para vivir únicamente nuestra felicidad.

Esch dijo con escarnio:

—Sí, igual que Balthasar con Ilona… Y por la noche se le puede lanzar contra ella un cuchillo.

Lohberg se indignó:

—Aquel que se emborracha con aguardiente barato no sabe apreciar un sorbo de agua cristalina, señorita Korn. Una pasión no es un amor.

La señorita Erna aplicó lo de cristalino a su persona y se sintió halagada:

—El traje que él le ha regalado vale treinta y ocho marcos. Me informé en la tienda. Explotar así a un hombre… Yo nunca me lo permitiría.

—Es necesario imponer orden —dijo Esch—. El inocente está en la cárcel y el culpable anda libre por ahí. Habría que matarle o matarse uno mismo.

Lohberg intervino, conciliador:

—Con la vida de los hombres no se juega.

—No —dijo la señorita Erna—, a quien habría que matar es a la mujer que no tiene sentimientos para el hombre… Cuando yo tengo que ocuparme de un hombre, soy una persona con sentimientos.

—Un amor auténtico, como el que enseña el Evangelio, se basa en el respeto mutuo —dijo Lohberg.

—Y usted respetará a su esposa, aunque ella no sea tan culta como usted… Tanto más si es una persona con sentimientos, como debe serlo una mujer.

—Solo una persona que tiene sentimientos está preparada y es apta para recibir la auténtica gracia redentora.

La señorita Erna dijo:

—Usted debe ser seguramente un buen hijo, señor Lohberg, un hijo que siente agradecimiento hacia su mamaíta.

A Esch esta observación le puso furioso, más furioso de lo que él mismo advertía:

—Un buen hijo por aquí, un buen hijo por allá… Me río yo del agradecimiento. Mientras se sigan cometiendo injusticias, no habrá redención en el mundo… ¿Por qué se ha sacrificado Martin y está en la cárcel?

—El señor Geyring es una víctima del veneno que devora al mundo —respondió Lohberg—. Hasta que los seres humanos no vuelvan a encontrar los caminos de la naturaleza, no dejarán de causarse daño unos a otros.

La señorita Erna dijo que ella amaba también la naturaleza y que salía con frecuencia de paseo.

—Los sentimientos nobles de la humanidad —prosiguió Lohberg— únicamente pueden despertar y desarrollarse en el seno de la naturaleza libre de Dios, una naturaleza que nos reconforta.

—Con estas ideas no ha salvado usted todavía a nadie de la cárcel —dijo Esch.

—Esto lo dice usted… —opinó la señorita Erna—. Yo, en cambio, digo que una persona sin sentimientos no es una persona. Un hombre tan inconstante como usted, señor Esch, no tiene siquiera derecho a hablar… Bah, todos son iguales.

—¿Cómo se puede tener tan mala opinión del mundo, señorita Korn?

La señorita Erna suspiró:

—Desengaños de la vida, señor Lohberg.

—Pero la esperanza nos sostiene, señorita Korn.

La señorita Erna miró pensativa al vacío:

—Efectivamente, si no hubiera esperanza… —y sacudió la cabeza—. Los hombres carecen de sentimientos, y demasiada inteligencia tampoco es bueno.

Esch se preguntó si mamá Hentjen y su marido habrían hablado así cuando se prometieron.

—En Dios y en la naturaleza divina reside toda esperanza —dijo Lohberg.

Erna no quiso ser menos que Lohberg:

—A Dios gracias yo voy con frecuencia a la iglesia y a confesar… —y añadió en tono triunfal—: Y nuestra santa religión católica tiene quizá más sentimientos que la luterana. Yo, si fuera hombre, no me casaría con una luterana.

Lohberg era demasiado cortés para contradecirla:

—Toda manera de dirigirse a Dios es igualmente digna de respeto… Cuando Dios une a dos seres, les otorga también la posibilidad de mantenerse unidos… Lo único que cuenta es la buena voluntad.

Las virtudes de Lohberg le resultaron a Esch de nuevo repugnantes, pese a que, precisamente por ellas, le había comparado a menudo con mamá Hentjen.

—Cualquier idiota puede hablar por hablar —dijo fogosamente.

Despectiva, la señorita Erna informó:

—El señor Esch, como es natural, se conforma con cualquiera, no se preocupa ni de los sentimientos ni de la santa religión. Basta con que ella tenga dinero.

Lohberg dijo que se resistía a creer una cosa así.

—Pues puede usted creerlo, yo le conozco bien, no tiene sentimientos ni reflexiona… Las ideas que usted tiene, señor Lohberg, no las tiene cualquiera.

En este caso, opinó Lohberg, no podía evitar compadecerle, ya que le sería negada toda felicidad sobre la tierra.

Esch se encogió de hombros. ¡Qué sabía aquel infeliz de un mundo nuevo! Y dijo sarcástico:

—Antes restablezcan el orden.

Pero la señorita Erna había hallado la solución:

—Si dos personas trabajan juntas, si por ejemplo su esposa le ayuda en la tienda, entonces todo lo demás se da por añadidura, aunque el marido sea luterano y la mujer católica.

—Desde luego —dijo Lohberg.

—O si dos personas tienen algo en común…, intereses comunes, pongamos por caso, entonces hay que estar juntos, ¿verdad?

—Desde luego —dijo Lohberg.

La señorita Erna dirigió su mirada de lagarto hacia Esch mientras decía:

—¿Tendría usted algo en contra, señor Lohberg, de que yo también participara en el negocio teatral de que ha hablado el señor Esch? Ahora que mi hermano se ha vuelto tan inconsciente, yo, al menos, he de procurar que entre dinero en la casa.

¡Cómo podría oponerse el señor Lohberg! Y cuando la señorita Erna dijo que podía invertir la mitad de sus ahorros, o sea unos mil marcos, él, con sumo agrado por parte de la señorita Erna, exclamó:

—¡Oh, entonces seremos socios!

A pesar de todo, Esch no estaba satisfecho. El haber logrado lo que quería no tenía en resumidas cuentas importancia, tal vez porque ya había renunciado sin más a Ilona, tal vez porque el fin, en realidad, era otro y más importante, o tal vez simplemente porque —esto fue lo único que vio con absoluta claridad— de pronto se planteó serios escrúpulos:

—Hablen ustedes primero con Gernerth, el director de teatro Gernerth. Yo me he limitado a llamarles la atención sobre el negocio, pero declino toda responsabilidad.

Sí, dijo la señorita, ella ya sabía que él era un hombre al que no le gustaba hacerse responsable de nada, y no debía tener miedo de que se le pidieran cuentas. Él no era más que un soltero infiel, y ella prefería el dedo meñique del señor Lohberg a la persona entera del señor Esch. Y el señor Lohberg debía volver con más frecuencia a tomar una taza de café. ¿Lo haría? Y como ya era tarde y todos se habían puesto de pie, se cogió al brazo de Lohberg. La lámpara derramaba sus suaves reflejos sobre sus cabezas y ambos, erguidos ante Esch, parecían una pareja de recién casados.

Esch se quitó la chaqueta y la colgó en el perchero. Luego la sacudió un poco, la cepilló y examinó con atención su cuello raído. Había de nuevo alguna cosa que no marchaba debidamente. Había renunciado a Ilona, pero ahora tenía que contemplar cómo Erna se apartaba de él para ofrecer su corazón a aquel idiota. Esto iba en contra de todas las reglas de contabilidad, las cuales, como es sabido, exigen una contrapartida para cada partida. Por otra parte, seguramente —y agitó la chaqueta con un gesto de descaro—, si él quisiera, un tipo como Lohberg no podría desbancarlo tan aprisa; con aquel idiota podía él competir todavía ventajosamente; no, August Esch no era ni mucho menos un engendro, y empezó a caminar hacia la puerta, pero se detuvo antes de abrirla: bah, en realidad no le apetecía. Además, la persona que se encontraba al otro lado hubiera podido creer que él se arrastraba hasta ella en agradecimiento por sus miserables mil marcos. Esch volvió a su cama, se sentó en ella y se desabrochó los zapatos. Hasta ahí todo estaba en orden. Y que en el fondo le doliera no poder acostarse con Erna encajaba también dentro de un orden. El sacrificio es el sacrificio. No obstante, quedaba un error de contabilidad no aclarado, y de momento no se le ocurrió cuál podía ser: de acuerdo, no iría al encuentro de la hembra, renunciaría al placer. Pero ¿por qué lo hacía? ¿Tal vez para escapar al matrimonio? O sea que uno se sacrifica en nimiedades para rehuir el sacrificio auténtico y no tener que pagar con la propia persona. Esch se dijo: «Soy un cerdo». Sí, era un cerdo, ni un ápice mejor que Nentwig, el cual eludía también toda responsabilidad. ¡Un desorden en el cual el diablo se movía a sus anchas!

Y si no había orden en la contabilidad, tampoco podía haber orden en el mundo, y mientras no hubiera orden, seguiría Ilona a merced de los cuchillos, seguiría Nentwig escapando al castigo con descaro y engaños, y Martin seguiría consumiéndose eternamente en la cárcel. Reflexionó intensamente y, en el momento en que dejó caer al suelo los calzoncillos, salió de dudas: los otros habían puesto su dinero a disposición de la idea de los combates, y él, que no tenía dinero, tenía que pagar con su persona, no precisamente casándose, pero sí poniéndose a disposición de la nueva empresa. Y como esto, lamentándolo mucho, no podía conciliarse con su empleo en Mannheim, tenía que dejarlo. Así era como él podía pagar. Y como si tuviera que buscar una prueba convincente, se dio cuenta en este momento de que no hubiera debido permanecer más tiempo en una sociedad que había llevado a Martin a la cárcel. Y nadie tendría derecho a tacharle de desleal por ello; incluso el señor presidente habría de reconocer que Esch era un muchacho cabal. Ahora Esch ya no pensó más en Erna y se metió tranquilamente en la cama. El hecho de que le resultara agradable regresar a Colonia y al local de mamá Hentjen disminuía ciertamente el sacrificio, pero apenas pesaba en la balanza; mamá Hentjen ni siquiera había contestado a su carta. Y locales los había de sobra en Mannheim. No, el regreso a Colonia, esa cochina ciudad, representaba una disminución ínfima del sacrificio, era, a lo sumo, una bonificación en el pago, y ninguna ley prohibía una bonificación así.

El deseo de dar la noticia del éxito a Gernerth le llevó a reunirse con él a primeras horas de la mañana: ¡Haber logrado dos mil marcos con tanta rapidez era una proeza! Gernerth le dio unos golpecitos en el hombro y le dijo que era un tipo extraordinario. Esto reconfortaba. A Gernerth le sorprendió su decisión de abandonar el empleo para ponerse al servicio de la nueva empresa pugilística; sin embargo, no tenía nada que oponer. «Ya lo arreglaremos, señor Esch», le dijo, y Esch se dirigió a la oficina central de la compañía naviera.

En los pisos superiores de las oficinas de la Mittelrheinische había largos y silenciosos pasillos recubiertos de linóleo marrón. Las puertas ostentaban impecables letreritos y al fondo de uno de los corredores, detrás de

una mesa alumbrada por una lámpara de pie, estaba sentado un conserje que le preguntaba a uno dónde quería ir y anotaba el nombre del visitante así como el motivo de la visita en un bloc de notas. Esch recorrió todo el pasillo y, como era la última vez que lo haría, observó detenidamente todos los detalles. Descifró los nombres de los letreros de las puertas, y al encontrarse, con gran sorpresa por su parte, con un nombre de mujer, se detuvo e intentó imaginarse a la persona que había detrás de aquella puerta: ¿Sería un empleado como cualquier otro que echaba cuentas inclinado sobre un pupitre, con manguitos negros para no mancharse al escribir, y, también como cualquier otro, hablaba fría e indiferentemente con las visitas? De repente se sintió atraído por aquella mujer desconocida que se encontraba tras la puerta, y la idea de una forma de amor nueva, sencilla, casi comercial, por así decirlo, un amor magistral, lo colmó por entero, un amor que debería ser tan liso, tan fresco, tan amplio y espacioso como aquellos pasillos cubiertos de linóleo. Pero luego, al observar la larga hilera de puertas con nombres masculinos, no pudo evitar pensar que aquella mujer sola rodeada de tantos hombres seguramente estaba tan asqueada como mamá Hentjen con su taberna. Experimentó de nuevo una profunda cólera contra los negocios, cólera contra una organización que, tras la fachada de un hermoso orden, de pasillos lisos, de bonitas y llanas contabilidades, oculta todas las infamias. Y a eso se le llama estabilidad. Ya sea simple apoderado o el propio presidente, no hay diferencia alguna entre un comerciante y otro. Y si Esch había lamentado por unos instantes dejar de ser miembro de la hermosa organización, dejar de formar parte de aquellos que podían entrar y salir de aquí sin ser detenidos, preguntados o anunciados por un conserje, ahora ya no lo lamentaba. Veía a un Nentwig sentado detrás de todas aquellas puertas, meros Nentwigs, todos confabulados, atentos solamente a procurar que Martin continuara consumiéndose en la cárcel. Le hubiera gustado bajar a la sección de contabilidad y decirles a los ciegos de allá que también ellos, por fin, tenían que evadirse de la esclavitud de las engañosas cifras y columnas numéricas y convertirse en seres libres como él; sí, debían hacerlo, incluso a riesgo de tener que emigrar a América como él, con él.

«Ha sido una actuación muy breve la suya», le dijo amablemente el jefe de personal, cuando se presentó en su oficina para solicitar un certificado. Esch estuvo a punto de revelar las verdaderas razones que le impulsaban a marcharse de aquella firma infame. Pero tuvo que resignarse a callar, porque el amable jefe de personal dedicaba ya su atención a otros asuntos, si bien iba repitiendo: «Una actuación muy breve… muy breve…». Lo repetía saboreando las palabras como si el término «actuación» le gustara de un modo especial y como si quisiera insinuar con él que tampoco el negocio teatral sería muy distinto o mejor siquiera que la empresa que Esch se disponía a abandonar. ¿Qué podía saber de aquello el jefe de personal? ¿Pretendía, en definitiva, acusarle de deslealtad y asestarle un golpe por la espalda? ¿Quería desmerecer su nueva colocación? Esch siguió con desconfianza los movimientos del hombre y comprobó con desconfianza el documento escrito a mano, aunque sabía bien que en las luchas pugilísticas nadie le pediría ningún certificado. Y como no se apartaba de su pensamiento la idea del negocio teatral, ni siquiera cuando se dirigió a la escalera por el corredor tapizado de linóleo marrón, ya no advirtió la tranquilidad y el orden que reinaban en el edificio, ni se fijó en la puerta que ostentaba un nombre de mujer, ni vio el letrero que decía «Contabilidad»; incluso la dirección y la presidencia, instaladas con toda su pompa en el edificio principal, le fueron totalmente indiferentes. Hasta que llegó a la calle no se volvió para mirar atrás, una mirada de despedida, se dijo, y se sintió como decepcionado al comprobar que no se detenía ningún carruaje ante la entrada principal. En realidad le hubiera gustado ver por lo menos una vez al tal Bertrand. Se oculta siempre, como Nentwig. Naturalmente es mejor no verle, no verle en absoluto, ni a él ni a Mannheim ni a nada que tuviera relación con uno u otra. «Hasta nunca», dijo Esch; sin embargo, incapaz de despedirse con tanta rapidez, permaneció allí en pie, guiñando los ojos porque el sol del mediodía se reflejaba en el asfalto de la calle nueva; se quedó quieto, esperando tal vez que se abriera sin ruido la puerta de cristal para dejar paso al presidente. Pero, aunque bajo la rutilante luz del sol pareciera que los batientes oscilaban, de modo que recordaban la puerta del mostrador, esto no era más que un espejismo, ya que los batientes siguieron firmes e inmóviles en su marco de mármol. No se abrieron y no salió nadie. Esch lo tomó como una insolencia: él tenía que estar ahí, de pie, bajo el sol, porque la Mittelrheinische se había establecido en una calle nueva, impecablemente asfaltada, en lugar de hacerlo en una calleja fresca y sombreada; le vino a la mente la cita de Götz; dio medio vuelta, cruzó la calle a grandes zancadas un poco torpes, dobló por la esquina siguiente, y cuando puso el pie en el estribo del tranvía que llegaba rechinante, estaba ya definitivamente decidido a abandonar Mannheim a la mañana siguiente y a dirigirse a Colonia para hacerse cargo de las negociaciones con el agente teatral Oppenheimer.

II

Para Esch, naturalmente, significaba una mortificación el que mamá Hentjen no hubiera contestado a su carta. Teniendo en cuenta que en la vida comercial lo normal es responder a las cartas transcurrido un plazo de tiempo prudencial, tanto más lógico sería hacerlo tratándose de una carta particular, lo cual, sin duda alguna, supone un trabajo, pero no habitual. No obstante, el silencio de mamá Hentjen se explicaba perfectamente conociendo su carácter. Todo el mundo sabía que si algún hombre le cogía la mano o intentaba rozar alguna de las curvas de su cuerpo, su rostro adquiría aquella conocida expresión de frialdad y de asco que la caracterizaba y con la cual solía poner a raya al atrevido; tal vez había leído su carta con análogos sentimientos. En definitiva una carta es algo que ha sido manoseado y mancillado por la mano de quien la ha escrito, más o menos como la ropa interior usada, y se podía atribuir a mamá Hentjen tal modo de pensar sin temor a equivocarse. Por algo era distinta a las demás mujeres; no era la clase de mujer que pudiera entrar en el cuarto de él por las mañanas sin sentirse molesta por el desorden reinante y por encontrarle lavándose: no era como Erna; mamá Hentjen nunca le hubiera pedido que se acordara de ella y que le escribiera hermosas cartas sentimentales. Tampoco era una mujer capaz de entregarse a un tipo como Korn, aunque era mucho más terrenal que Ilona. Desde luego mamá Hentjen era mucho mejor; no obstante, le parecía que ella tenía que defender de forma artificial en el ámbito de lo terrenal aquello que a Ilona le había sido concedido por anticipado. Y si su carta le había producido asco, lo consideraba justo y bien merecido; casi deseaba oír palabras desagradables de su boca: le daba la impresión de que ella podía saber que él había hecho nuevamente de las suyas y sentía fija en él aquella mirada con que ella le castigaba cuando salía con Hede. Mamá Hentjen no podía soportar aquellas relaciones y, a fin de cuentas, la muchacha pertenecía a su establecimiento.

Pero al llegar a Colonia y encaminar sus primeros pasos a casa de mamá Hentjen, Esch no fue recibido con la confianza deseada ni con el temido desabrimiento. Ella dijo tan solo: «Así que ha vuelto usted, señor Esch; esperemos que sea por mucho tiempo», y a él le pareció ser alguien con quien ya no se cuenta, se sintió condenado a vegetar eternamente dentro del grupo de los Korn. Y cuando más tarde mamá Hentjen se acercó a su mesa, todavía le mortificó más el que ella preguntara únicamente por Martin: «Claro, eso es lo que ha conseguido el señor Geyring», ella se lo había advertido más de una vez. Esch se limitó a responder con monosílabos; todo cuanto sabía se lo había dicho ya por escrito. «Cierto, y todavía no le he dado las gracias por su carta», dijo la señora Hentjen, y esto fue todo. A pesar de su decepción, él sacó un paquete: «Le he traído un recuerdo de Mannheim». Era una reproducción en bronce del monumento a Schiller erigido frente al teatro de Mannheim, y Esch señaló la repisa desde donde la torre Eiffel, con la bandera negra-blanca-roja, miraba hacia abajo: tal vez allí arriba quedaría bien. Y aunque él se había limitado a entregar el objeto sin darle importancia, la señora Hentjen manifestó una auténtica sorprendente alegría, pues era algo que podría enseñar a sus amigas: «Oh, no, ahí no lo vería nadie; es demasiado bonito, lo pondré arriba en mi cuarto… Pero no debería usted haber hecho este gasto por mí». La cordialidad de la mujer le devolvió el buen humor, y empezó a contar cosas de su estancia en Mannheim, manifestando de vez en cuando puntos de vista que en realidad eran de aquel idiota de Lohberg, pero que suponía serían del agrado de mamá Hentjen. Interrumpido a menudo, cuando ella debía acudir al mostrador, ensalzó la hermosura de la naturaleza y en especial la del Rin, y se extrañó de que ella permaneciera siempre en Colonia sin disfrutar nunca de cosas que estaban al alcance de la mano. «Eso está bien para los enamorados», dijo la señora Hentjen en tono despectivo, y Esch opinó respetuosamente que ella podía efectuar la excursión, tanto sola como en compañía de una amiga. Esto sonó más convincente y tranquilizador a los oídos de la señora Hentjen, y dijo que quizá alguna vez tendría en cuenta sus observaciones. «Además», observó con displicencia, «yo conozco el Rin de mis tiempos de muchacha.» Pero apenas lo hubo dicho, se quedó mirando fijamente al vacío. Esch no se sorprendió, porque conocía de sobras esos bruscos cambios de humor de mamá Hentjen. Pero esta vez existía una razón especial que Esch naturalmente no podía imaginar: era la primera vez que la señora Hentjen mencionaba algo de su vida ante un cliente, y esto la asustó tanto que huyó a refugiarse tras el mostrador, para retocar frente al espejo el pan de azúcar que llevaba en la cabeza. Sentía rencor hacia Esch por haberle arrancado confidencias, y no volvió a su lado, pese a que seguía sobre la mesa la reproducción del monumento a Schiller. Hubiera preferido ordenarle que se lo guardara de nuevo, sobre todo porque un par de amigos se unieron a Esch, y palpaban ahora el regalo con ojos masculinos y dedos masculinos. Se refugió todavía más lejos, en la cocina, y Esch comprendió que debía haber cometido algún error inexplicable. Cuando ella, finalmente, apareció otra vez en el salón, él se levantó y llevó la estatuilla al mostrador. Ella le sacó brillo con uno de los paños con que secaba los vasos; Esch, no sabiendo cómo encontrar una salida a la situación, se quedó allí de pie y contó que en el teatro que se encontraba frente al monumento había tenido lugar la *prémière* —palabra que le era

familiar desde que tenía trato con Gernerth— de una obra de Schiller. Ahora él tenía mucha más relación con el teatro y, si todo salía bien, muy pronto podría obsequiarla con unas entradas. ¿Ah, sí? ¿Tenía relaciones con gentes de teatro? Claro que él siempre había llevado una vida disoluta. Para mamá Hentjen las relaciones con el teatro solo eran concebibles a través de actrices libertinas, y respondió despectiva y sin más que a ella no le gustaba el teatro, porque en el teatro solo existía una cosa: el amor, y esto la aburría soberanamente. Esch no se atrevió a llevarle la contraria, pero mientras la señora Hentjen cogía su regalo y, para llevarlo a lugar seguro, lo subía a su cuarto, él entabló conversación con Hede; esta apenas le había saludado, ofendida, evidentemente, porque él ni siquiera la hubiera considerado merecedora también de una postal. Hede, por lo demás, tenía una expresión malhumorada, y malhumorado parecía todo el local, donde el piano automático, puesto en marcha por algún bromista, derramó de pronto su música estridente. Hede se precipitó hacia la máquina para detenerla, pues estaba prohibido por la policía poner música a horas tan tardías, y los hombres rieron el éxito de la broma. A través de la ventana entreabierta penetraba un soplo de aire de la noche, y Esch, que recibió una bocanada en pleno rostro, se deslizó fuera en busca del suave frescor, rápido, antes de que Hede pudiera dirigirse nuevamente a él, rápido, antes de encontrarse otra vez con mamá Hentjen, pues esta tal vez acabaría por sonsacarle que había dejado su empleo en la Mittelrheinische: mamá Hentjen no se dejaría convencer de que el negocio de las luchas pugilísticas fuera algo serio ni confiaría lo más mínimo en el éxito, sino que por el contrario le abrumaría con sarcásticas observaciones, quizá incluso con razón. Pero por hoy él ya tenía bastante, y se alejó de allí.

En las oscuras callejas olía a moho y a humedad, como siempre en el verano. Esch estaba inexplicablemente contento. El aire y los oscuros muros daban sensación de hogar; no se sentía solo. Casi deseaba encontrarse con Nentwig. Le habría encantado propinarle una buena paliza. Y Esch se alegró de que a veces la vida ofreciera soluciones tan simples. Pero las ganancias en la lotería son muy raras, y por eso precisamente tenía uno que quedarse con el negocio teatral.

El agente teatral Oppenheimer no poseía una antesala con muebles tapizados ni un conserje con bloc para anotar las visitas. Esto se daba por descontado. Pero el ser humano cambia a disgusto lo bueno por lo peor, y Esch había conservado en algún rincón de su alma la esperanza de encontrarse con una empresa parecida a la Mittelrheinische, aunque en una versión adecuada al teatro. No. Era totalmente distinto. Después de haber trepado por una oscura y angosta escalera, y haber logrado descubrir la placa de la agencia de Oppenheimer, tuvo que entrar sin ser anunciado, dado que nadie respondió a su llamada. Se encontró en un cuarto donde había un palanganero de hierro con agua sucia y muchos estantes repletos de papeles. En una de las paredes se veía un calendario de propaganda de una compañía de seguros; en otra, enmarcado, un obsequio de la Compañía Hamburgo-Americana, el barco *Emperatriz Augusta Victoria* reproducido en vivos colores, rodeado de un enjambre de pequeñas embarcaciones, en el momento de salir del puerto e iniciar su travesía rasgando las espumantes olas azules del mar del Norte.

Esch no se molestó en mirárselo todo con atención, pues había venido aquí por negocios; y como la discreción no era precisamente una de sus virtudes, se adentró, aunque un tanto vacilante, hasta un segundo cuarto. Allí encontró una mesa escritorio que, en contraste con el enorme desorden reinante en la habitación, mostraba su superficie desnuda sin ni rastro de utensilios para escribir, solo con gran número de manchas de tinta sobre la madera marrón llena de antiguas grietas grises y recientes grietas amarillas, y un paño verde roto por diferentes sitios. No se veía ninguna otra puerta. También en esta estancia había muchos y notables adornos en las paredes, numerosas fotografías sostenidas con chinchetas, y despertaron en especial el interés de Esch los retratos de mujeres que, vestidas con mallas o trajes de lentejuelas, se exhibían en posturas provocativas y seductoras; las miró con atención para ver si Ilona se encontraba entre ellas. Luego consideró más conveniente retirarse y pedir información sobre el horario del señor Oppenheimer. Puesto que no encontró a ningún conserje, llamó a varias puertas y, despreciado él mismo, recibió despectivos informes: Oppenheimer nunca tenía oficina a horas fijas. «Puede usted esperar, si no tiene nada mejor que hacer», le dijo una mujer.

Al menos, ahora ya lo sabía. No resultaba agradable el trato que la gente daba allí y, si este desprecio formaba parte de su nueva profesión, no era nada divertido. Pero no podía cambiar nada; él había arrastrado este riesgo por amor a Ilona (y esto proporcionaba una suave sensación voluptuosa en la región del corazón); era su nueva profesión, y, por tanto, Esch esperó. ¡Vaya simpáticas costumbres tenía en su oficina el tal señor Oppenheimer! Esch no pudo contener la risa; desde luego no era un negocio en el que hiciera falta presentar informes. Permaneció de pie en el portal, observando la calle, hasta que finalmente un hombrecillo insignificante, de pelo rubio y tez rosada, entró en la casa y subió la escalera. Esch lo siguió. Era el señor Oppenheimer. Cuando le explicó el motivo de su visita, el señor Oppenheimer dijo: «¿Las luchas de mujeres? Lo haré, lo haré. Pero dígame una cosa ¿para qué le necesita Gernerth a usted en este asunto?». Sí, ¿para qué le necesitaba Gernerth? ¿Por qué estaba él aquí? ¿Cómo diablos había llegado hasta aquí? Ahora que había dejado su empleo en la Mittelrheinische, ya no se trataba de un viaje de negocios en misión especial como

siempre había previsto. ¿Por qué, pues, había venido a Colonia? ¿Acaso porque Colonia estaba más cerca del mar?

Cuando un hombre audaz emigra a América, sus parientes y amigos le despiden en el puerto agitando los pañuelos. La orquesta del barco interpreta la canción «He de abandonar, he de abandonar mi pequeña ciudad», y aunque, dada la regularidad con que parten buques, esto puede parecer un alarde de hipocresía por parte del director de la orquesta, logra, sin embargo, conmover a mucha gente. Cuando se tiende un cable hasta el pequeño remolcador, y el gigante del océano se desliza por encima del oscuro espejo que lo sostiene, resuena todavía sobre las aguas, pobre y perdida, la alegre melodía con que el solícito director de orquesta intenta alegrar los ánimos de los emigrantes. Entonces muchos se dan cuenta de cuán ocasionalmente están esparcidos los seres humanos sobre la superficie de mares y tierras, y de que entre ellos solo hay tendidos unos hilos tenues que los unen. Cuando el gigante del océano sale del puerto y bajo su quilla va perdiendo color el agua y ya no se nota la corriente del río y parece que las aguas quieran retornar a puerto, entonces el gigante del océano se sumerge con frecuencia en una ola de invisible pero tensa angustia y muchos quisieran detenerlo. El gigante del océano va dejando atrás los barcos anclados a lo largo de las desmanteladas orillas mientras las grúas chirriantes cargan y descargan objetos indeterminados destinados a fines indeterminados; va dejando atrás las desmanteladas orillas que río abajo se cubren de un verde polvoriento para finalizar en un miserable paisaje; va dejando atrás las dunas donde ya aparece el faro; el gigante del océano va amarrado como un proscrito a su pequeño guardián y, tanto en los barcos como en las orillas, hay hombres que lo miran pasar y levantan la mano como queriendo retenerlo, pero su gesto no pasa de ser un ademán débil, duro y torpe. Sigue navegando, su silueta casi se pierde en la línea del horizonte, apenas se distinguen ya sus tres chimeneas, y si alguien examina el mar desde la costa se preguntará si el buque se dirige al puerto o bien va hacia una soledad que el hombre desde la orilla ni siquiera puede concebir. Si aquel que lo contempla ve que navega hacia la costa, se tranquiliza, como si el barco pudiera traerle al ser más querido o una carta esperada durante largo tiempo sin saberlo. A veces, en la sosegada bruma de los confines del mar, se encuentran dos barcos, y se ve cómo se deslizan uno junto al otro. Hay un momento en que las dos tenues siluetas se confunden en una sola, son unos instantes conmovedores y sublimes hasta que se separan de nuevo suavemente, tan silenciosos y mansos como la lejana bruma donde esto ocurre; y cada uno sigue su ruta en solitario. Dulce esperanza nunca cumplida.

Pero aquel que va en el barco ignora que nosotros nos inquietamos por él. Apenas distingue ya la ondulante línea de la costa y solo si adivina la amarillenta silueta del faro sabe que en tierra firme hay todavía alguien que teme por él y piensa en sus peligros. Él no comprende el peligro en que se encuentra, no es consciente de que una enorme montaña de agua le separa del fondo del mar, que es la tierra. Solo teme el peligro aquel que tiene una meta, pues tiene miedo a causa de esta meta. Pero él anda sobre las lisas planchas del buque que, como un velódromo, le obligan a caminar en círculos sobre la cubierta del barco, mucho más llana que todos los caminos por él recorridos hasta ahora. El hombre que está en alta mar no tiene ninguna meta y no le es posible terminar de completarse, está encerrado dentro de sí. Aquello que en él sería realizable descansa. Quien le ama, solo puede amarle por lo que promete, por lo que él es, no por lo que conseguirá o ha conseguido; no lo conseguirá jamás. Por eso el hombre que está en tierra ignora lo que es el amor y confunde su angustia con el amor. En cambio, el que viaja por mar lo reconoce enseguida y los hilos que se habían tendido entre él y los hombres de la costa se rompen antes de que esta última desaparezca. Casi está de más que el director de la orquesta intente darle ánimos con sus canciones, pues al viajero del mar le basta con deslizar su mano por encima de la lisa y pulida madera marrón o por los dorados herrajes. El deslumbrante mar se extiende ante él; está contento; le arrastran potentes máquinas y su trepidar le muestra el camino, camino que no lleva a ninguna parte. La mirada del viajero del mar ha cambiado, es una mirada huérfana que ya no nos conoce. Ha olvidado sus anteriores tareas, ya no cree en la exactitud de las sumas numéricas; sus pasos le llevan hasta la cabina del telegrafista, admira el mecanismo del aparato al oírlo, pero no puede comprender que a través de él se reciban mensajes de tierra ni que se puedan enviar mensajes a tierra, y si el viajero del mar no fuera un hombre prosaico imaginaría que aquel hombre está hablando con el universo. Al que viaja por mar le gustan los cetáceos y los delfines que juguetean en torno al barco, y no tiene miedo a los icebergs. Pero si aparece una costa a lo lejos, no quiere verla y puede que se refugie en el interior de la panza del buque, hasta que aquella desaparezca de nuevo, porque sabe muy bien que allí no le esperan el amor ni la libertad, sino solo una intensa angustia y los muros de la meta. Pero el hombre que busca el amor busca el mar: tal vez habla todavía de la tierra que está al otro lado del mar, pero no se refiere a ella en realidad, pues piensa que el viaje es inconmensurable, que es la esperanza del alma solitaria que intenta abrirse y absorber la otra alma que surge de la bruma y se filtra en él, el liberado, reconociéndole como lo que él es: el ser mismo, no nacido e inmortal.

Desde luego Esch no pensaba estas cosas, aunque seguía con la obsesión de emigrar a América y llevarse con él a los contables de la Mittelrheinische. Y cuando entró en la oficina del señor Oppenheimer, miró

fijamente y con suma atención cómo el *Emperatriz Augusta Victoria* cortaba con su proa el oleaje.

Reanudó su antigua vida, se hospedaba en la habitación que tenía antes y almorzaba con frecuencia en la taberna de mamá Hentjen. Usaba obstinadamente su bicicleta, pero su camino diario no le llevaba ya a Stemberg & Cía., sino a la oficina del señor Oppenheimer. La señora Hentjen observaba el cambio de sus actividades con una mirada que, pese a reflejar gran indiferencia, denotaba también algo así como desprecio, disconformidad o tal vez incluso preocupación, y aunque Esch no tenía más remedio que darle la razón respecto a esta preocupación, o quizá precisamente por eso, se esforzó en demostrarle claramente las ventajas y buenas perspectivas de su nueva profesión. Lo consiguió en parte. Ella escuchaba únicamente a medias el relato temerario de la gran vida en cuyo umbral se hallaba él ahora y que abarcaba no solo América sino todas las partes del mundo, pero esta mezcla de riqueza deslumbrante, arte y alegría de viajar que él le exponía, esta meta que debía alcanzar él y no ella, esta grandeza, en fin, despertó cierta envidia en aquella mujer que desde hacía quince años vivía odiando su sórdida y angosta suerte. Podría decirse que se sentía embargada por una especie de sarcástica admiración, pues mientras, por una parte, le quería hacer ver a él lo absurdo e inasequible de sus proyectos, por otra su imaginación superaba la de él, le daba ambiciosos consejos y le predecía que podía llegar a ser el amo o, como él decía, el presidente de aquel ejército de artistas y directores. «Primero hay que imponer a toda la banda un orden muy severo y una rígida disciplina», solía contestar Esch, «es lo más importante.» Sí, estaba absolutamente convencido, y su profundo desprecio por el mundo de los artistas no solo se basaba en el pésimo efecto que le produjera el grasiento bloc de Gernerth o la anárquica oficina de Oppenheimer, sino también en la opinión de mamá Hentjen, que, en uno de esos momentos de admiradora complicidad —lo universal desemboca a menudo en lo hogareño—, accedió a su solicitud y le confió la revisión del estado de sus cuentas; accedió con una sonrisa condescendiente, convencida por completo de que su sencillo libro de caja estaba llevado de forma inteligente y modélica. Pero apenas se había inclinado Esch sobre las columnas numéricas, mamá Hentjen le gritó que no hacía falta poner aquella expresión de suficiencia, y que la dichosa contabilidad no le causaba a ella la menor impresión; era mejor que se ocupara del negocio teatral, más necesitado de control que el suyo. Y le arrancó los libros de las manos.

¡Oh, el negocio del teatro! Dado el carácter aleatorio de la empresa, Oppenheimer se había acostumbrado a aceptar los hechos casuales sin plantearse muchos problemas y se sentía desarmado frente a la testarudez de Esch; se reía al ver aparecer todas las mañanas a un hombre montado en bicicleta que se comportaba casi como si fuera su socio; pero lo toleró de mejor grado cuando supo que Esch invertía dinero en el número de lucha femenina, y se tragaba los insultos con que Esch le obsequiaba todos los días a propósito del desorden reinante en el negocio. Juntos negociaron el arrendamiento del teatro Alhambra para los meses de junio y julio con su propietario y, como había que encontrar un campo de acción para el celo de Esch, se le encargó que reclutase a las luchadoras.

Versado en tabernas, burdeles y mujeres, Esch parecía creado para este trabajo. Recorrió muchos locales y si encontraba chicas adecuadas, que quisieran dedicarse al deporte, anotaba sus nombres y datos personales en un bloc que se había procurado para este uso, sin olvidar anotar junto a cada nombre, en una columna que había reservado bajo la designación de «Observaciones», su opinión sobre los méritos de la solicitante, de acuerdo con una clasificación especial. Destacaba en primer lugar a muchachas con nombres extranjeros o exóticos y de procedencia extranjera, pues tenía que llegar a ser una competición internacional, y solo excluyó a las húngaras. A veces resultaba muy divertido examinar los músculos de las muchachas y de vez en cuando se dejaba seducir por aquellos musculosos encantos. Pero, a pesar de todo, no le satisfacía su ocupación y cuando hablaba de ella a mamá Hentjen, de modo incidental y despectivo, decía la verdad: no podía considerar digna de él tal ocupación y prefería sentarse ante el desnudo escritorio de Oppenheimer o preocuparse del Alhambra.

Iba allá con frecuencia, entraba en la gris sala vacía donde resonaban los pasos sobre el piso de madera, pasaba por encima de las oscilantes tablas colocadas sobre el hueco de la orquesta y llegaba al escenario, cuyos desnudos muros ciclópeos eran casi demasiado pesados para las livianas telas de los decorados que pronto los cubrirían. Al medir a grandes pasos el escenario, experimentaba una sensación de triunfo, porque aquí ya no estaría permitido el lanzamiento de cuchillos, y echaba una ojeada al despacho de la dirección, considerando si debía o no instalarse en él ahora mismo. También pensaba que alguna vez tendría que mostrar su nuevo reino a la señora Hentjen. El aire era extrañamente gris y frío, mientras que allá fuera el jardín del restaurante ardía bajo un sol radiante, y este imperio hermético de polvorienta extrañeza, encerrado en sí mismo, era como una isla solitaria de lo desconocido dentro de un mundo conocido, una promesa y también una indicación de lo que yacía, extraño y prometedor, detrás del enorme mar gris de los muros. A veces iba al Alhambra por la noche. Entonces el jardín estaba iluminado y sobre el podio de madera, bajo los árboles, tocaba una orquesta. El teatro estaba oscuro y casi perdido detrás de las luces, sumergido en las tinieblas hasta el tejado, y nadie podía imaginarse su capacidad y sus instalaciones. A Esch le gustaba ir al teatro a esas horas, porque le gustaba pensar que le estaba reservado a él y a nadie más el privilegio de despertar de nuevo

la vida en aquella oscura mansión.

Cuando Esch fue una de las mañanas siguientes al Alhambra, encontró al propietario jugando a las cartas en la barra del bar. Tomó asiento junto a los demás y jugaron hasta últimas horas de la tarde. Al anochecer Esch sintió su rostro vacío y acartonado, y cayó en la cuenta de que aquella vida era igual a la que se llevaba en los almacenes de Mannheim en tiempo de huelga. Solo faltaba que apareciera Korn presumiendo de sus amores con Ilona. ¿Qué sentido tenía, pues, haberse despedido de la Mittelrheinische? Aquí estaba, sumido en ociosa actividad, comiéndose su dinero, y ni siquiera había vengado a Martin. Si se hubiera quedado en Mannheim, habría podido al menos visitarle en la cárcel.

Durante la cena se acusó de haber abandonado tan cobardemente a Martin, pero cuando la señora Hentjen le respondió que cada uno es artífice de su propia suerte y que el señor Geyring, a quien ella había advertido más que suficientemente, no podía pedir que un amigo se quedara por su culpa en Mannheim y renunciara a una brillante carrera, Esch se enfadó con ella y la atacó con tanta dureza que la mujer se refugió detrás del mostrador y se dedicó a retocarse el peinado. Esch pagó inmediatamente y salió del local, furioso de que ella hubiera calificado de brillante carrera esta ociosidad. No quería, sin embargo, admitir que fuera este el motivo de su ira, sino que le reprochó a ella únicamente su frialdad y dureza de corazón, y pasó la noche devanándose los sesos en busca de algo que beneficiara a Martin.

Por la mañana temprano se dirigió a la oficina de Oppenheimer. Se había procurado material para escribir y pasó toda la mañana redactando un candente artículo, en el que denunciaba con toda claridad que el meritísimo secretario Geyring había sido víctima de una intriga demoníaco-demagógica, tramada por la compañía naviera Mittelrheinische y por la policía de Mannheim. Llevó este artículo sin vacilar ni un instante a la redacción del periódico socialdemócrata *Volksmacht*.

El edificio en que el *Volksmacht* tenía su sede no era precisamente un palacio de la prensa. No había vestíbulos de mármol ni puertas de hierro forjado. Recordaba en cierto modo la oficina de Oppenheimer, solo que aquí se observaba mayor actividad; pero los domingos, cuando el personal del periódico descansaba, debía de tener el mismo aspecto. La negra baranda de hierro de la escalera se pegaba a las manos; las paredes desconchadas y raspadas mostraban huellas de muchas capas sucesivas de pintura, y desde una ventana podía verse un angosto patio donde había un coche cargado con pilas de papel. En alguna parte trabajaban las máquinas de imprimir con asmáticos suspiros. A través de una puerta, blanca en otro tiempo, que golpeaba pesadamente, porque estaba desvencijada, se llegaba a la redacción. En lugar del calendario de seguros colgaba de la pared un mapa de ferrocarriles, y en lugar de fotografías de bailarinas, un retrato de Karl Marx. Lo demás era igual y, de pronto, resultó totalmente absurdo haber venido hasta aquí, e incluso el artículo, que hacía unos momentos parecía tan vigoroso y amenazador, quedaba repentinamente anodino e inútil. En todas partes la misma gentuza, pensó Esch furioso, caterva de demagogos que está en todas partes y vive con idéntico desorden. No, no tenía ningún sentido poner un arma en las manos de estos o de aquellos; en sus manos se torna vana, pues es imposible saber lo que ocurre aquí o allá.

Se le indicó una segunda estancia. Tras una mesa que tal vez algún día estuvo cubierta con un paño verde, había un hombre que llevaba una chaqueta de pana marrón. Esch le entregó el manuscrito. El redactor le echó un vistazo rápido y lo puso en un cestillo que tenía a su lado.

—No lo ha leído —dijo Esch ásperamente.

—Sí, sí, ya sé de qué va… La huelga de Mannheim. Veremos si podemos servirnos de él.

Esch estaba sorprendido de que aquel hombre no sintiera ninguna curiosidad por el contenido, y también de que se comportara como si le conociera.

—Permítame, son hechos que aportan una nueva luz sobre la huelga —insistió.

El redactor cogió otra vez el manuscrito, pero lo volvió a dejar inmediatamente.

—¿Qué hechos? No encuentro nada nuevo aquí.

Esch tuvo la impresión de que aquel hombre quería presumir de saberlo todo.

—¡Yo fui testigo presencial! ¡Estuve presente en la asamblea!

—¿Ah, sí? Nuestra gente de confianza también estaba allí.

—¿O sea que ya lo han publicado?

—Que yo sepa, no ocurrió allí nada especial.

Esch estaba tan sorprendido que tomó asiento, pese a que el otro no le había invitado a hacerlo.

—Querido señor y camarada —prosiguió el redactor—, no podemos estar esperando a que usted se digne traernos un informe.

—Sí, claro, pero —Esch no comprendía— ¿por qué no han hecho ustedes nada? ¿Por qué permiten que Martin, que Geyring —corrigió— siga en la cárcel siendo inocente?

—¡Vaya! Mi enhorabuena por sus conocimientos de derecho —el redactor miró el manuscrito, donde aparecía el nombre de Esch—, señor Esch. ¿Cree usted que con esto podríamos obtener la libertad de Geyring?

El hombre se rió. Esch no se dejó confundir por su hilaridad.

—Es a los otros a quienes habría que poner a la sombra… ¡Esto está clarísimo para cualquiera que estuviese allí!

—O sea que, según usted, ¿deberíamos hacer encarcelar a la directiva de la Mittelrheinische en lugar de Geyring?

«Qué risa tan puerca», pensó Esch sin contestar. ¿Encarcelar a Bertrand? ¡A Bertrand también y no solo a Nentwig! Claro que, en definitiva, mirándolo bien, no existiría gran diferencia entre un presidente y un Nentwig. Desde luego, el Mannheim era mejor; para alguien como él la cárcel no era suficiente. Esch dijo pensativo:

—Meter a Bertrand en la cárcel.

El redactor continuaba riéndose:

—Solo esto nos faltaría.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó Esch irritado.

—Es un hombre simpático, amable, asequible —explicó el redactor con énfasis—, un excelente hombre de negocios con quien, a pesar de todo, se puede convivir.

—¿Le gusta a usted convivir con alguien que se entiende con la policía?

—¡Por todos los santos del cielo! Es más que natural que los empresarios colaboren con la policía; si nosotros estuviéramos arriba, también actuaríamos así…

—¡Bonita justicia! —replicó Esch con indignación.

El redactor levantó las manos en un gesto de alegre resignación:

—¿Qué quiere usted? Así es el orden legal del mundo capitalista. Hoy por hoy debemos preferir un consejo de administración que procure mantener la empresa en marcha que uno que la lleve a la ruina. Si de ustedes dependiera, se metería en la cárcel a todos los jefes de industrias que están contra nosotros, y lo único que se conseguiría sería una crisis industrial. Y nos felicitaríamos por ello, ¿no?

Esch, furioso, repitió testarudo:

—A pesar de todo, deberían encarcelarle.

La hilaridad del redactor recobró su tono provocativo:

—¡Vaya! Ahora nos entendemos por fin. Usted piensa así porque él es un invertido. —Esch aguzó los oídos. El redactor parecía cada vez más divertido—. ¿Es esto lo que le molesta? Pues sobre este punto puedo tranquilizarle: lo practica en Italia. Además, no se encarcela tan fácilmente a un hombre así como a un socialdemócrata.

Así estaban las cosas pues: muebles tapizados, conserjes plateados, grandes coches y un maricón. ¡Y Nentwig andando por ahí completamente libre! Esch se quedó mirando fijamente el rostro con expresión divertida del redactor:

—¡Pero Martin está en la cárcel!

El redactor dejó el lápiz sobre la mesa y abrió levemente los brazos:

—Querido amigo y camarada, ni usted ni yo podemos cambiar nada. La huelga de Mannheim fue una absoluta idiotez, no quedaba otro remedio que dejar a los acontecimientos seguir su curso y apechugar con el fracaso, y alegrarnos de que los tres meses de Geyring nos proporcionen material para la propaganda de agitación. Muchas gracias, pues, por su artículo, querido amigo y camarada, y cuando tenga usted alguna otra cosa, tráigala más pronto que esta vez.

Tendió la mano a Esch y este, pese a estar furioso, se inclinó en un torpe saludo.

Se acercaba el mes de junio. Esch hizo en nombre de Oppenheimer las gestiones pertinentes en la imprenta y en el establecimiento que realizaba los carteles. Todo estaba preparado. Carteles convincentes aparecieron por toda la ciudad en vallas y columnas, y anunciaban que las mujeres más fuertes de distintas naciones se reunirían allí para medir sus fuerzas y que quien lo dudara podía comprobar la verdad de tal afirmación en la lista de nombres: Tatiana Leonoff, la campeona rusa, Maud Ferguson, ganadora de los campeonatos de Nueva York, Mirzl Oberleitner, poseedora de la copa del torneo de Viena, sin olvidar a la campeona alemana Irmentraud Kroff. Los nombres eran en gran parte fruto de la fantasía de Oppenheimer, a quien los nombres auténticos casi siempre le parecían poco sugestivos. Esch se había opuesto inútilmente a este engaño; y para esto se había él esforzado tanto, reclutando muchachas verdaderamente internacionales, para que luego un judío como aquel diera vuelta a los nombres. Consideró esto como una nueva prueba del estado anárquico de un mundo en el que nadie sabe si está a la derecha o a la izquierda, si está arriba o está abajo, y donde, en definitiva, poco importa que un señor Oppenheimer le haga a uno la faena de cambiar este o aquel nombre; uno debía alegrarse de que, al menos, Oppenheimer no se hubiera inventado un nombre húngaro. Dios sabía que esta Hungría no tenía por qué existir, y el que Oppenheimer hubiera incluido Italia en la lista de luchadoras le parecía igualmente inadecuado. ¿Había siquiera la certeza de que allá abajo, en Italia, hubiera mujeres? Allá solo circulan maricones. Sin embargo, no veía con disgusto el cartel con los nombres extranjeros: un país se alineaba junto a otro y el ancho mundo se le aparecía como su propia obra, se le convertía en promesa y esperanza firme del mundo futuro. Llevó un cartel a la taberna de mamá Hentjen y, sin previa consulta, lo fijó en la pared de madera debajo de la torre Eiffel.

Pero la señora Hentjen le guardaba todavía rencor por la forma con que él la había atacado a causa de Geyring, y le gritó desde el mostrador que hiciera el favor de pegar su cartel donde le dieran permiso para ello. Aquí era ella la que mandaba. Esch, que no se acordaba ya de aquel incidente y solo cayó en la cuenta al ver la expresión curvada de mamá Hentjen, actuó como si se dispusiera a obedecer su orden. Su docilidad desarmó a mamá Hentjen; salió de detrás del mostrador y se acercó, sin dejar de refunfuñar, a mirar el cartel. Cuando hubo descifrado la lista de nombres de mujer, sintió asco y compasión: no envidiaba a aquellas mujerotas la humillación de tener que enzarzarse en una lucha bajo las asquerosas miradas de los hombres; las compadecía sinceramente. Esch, como realizador de todo aquello, se le aparecía igual que un pachá en medio de su harén, y el asunto le parecía de una maldad tan refinada, de una abyección tan grande, que Esch, a sus ojos, estaba ahora a otro nivel, en una esfera casi totalmente distinta a la de los demás hombres que se sentaban allí con sus pequeñas y despreciables maldades y concupiscencias. Su tieso pelo corto, aquella cabeza oscura, aquella tez amarillo-rojiza, le daban miedo. No, no comprendía cómo toleraba allí a aquel hombre con sus abominables carteles, y se asustó cuando él la cogió ahora por la muñeca: ¿acaso no parecía que quisiera agarrarla y dejarla indefensa para unirla a la lista de los nombres de mujeres que figuraban en el cartel? Casi sintió una decepción al ver que no sucedía nada de todo esto, sino que Esch se limitaba simplemente a llevar su dócil dedo de nombre en nombre: «Rusia, Alemania, Estados Unidos de Norteamérica, Bélgica, Italia, Austria, Bohemia», iba leyendo y, como su voz sonaba inofensiva, la señora Hentjen se tranquilizó. «Pero faltan varios, por ejemplo Suiza y Luxemburgo», le dijo. Pero luego se apartó del cartel como si apestara: «¡Y que a usted le guste mantener trato con semejantes mujeres!». Esch respondió con palabras de Martin, diciendo que cada uno está en el lugar que Dios le ha asignado y que, por otra parte, el contacto directo con las luchadoras sería tarea de Teltscher, no suya; él se ocupaba únicamente de la parte administrativa.

Teltscher llegó a Colonia e hizo acudir a la oficina de Oppenheimer a las mujeres seleccionadas por Esch. Estuvo con ellas toda la mañana, eliminó a muchas de antemano y convocó a las restantes en el Alhambra para impartirles la primera lección y examinar sus aptitudes para el espectáculo.

Fue una sesión muy divertida: Teltscher había traído las mallas y cuando Esch, bloc en mano, hubo comprobado la personalidad de las presentes, el señor Teltini invitó a las damas a que se trasladaran al vestuario para ponérselas. La mayoría de ellas se negaron a hacerlo, querían ver primero a las otras con aquella desacostumbrada indumentaria. Cuando las más decididas salieron de los vestuarios desnudas y terriblemente avergonzadas, todos se rieron. Las puertas que daban al jardín del restaurante estaban abiertas de par en par; el verdor de los árboles miraba alegre hacia el interior y cuando entraba una bocanada de aire se notaba en la sala el cálido sol de la mañana. En las puertas estaba el propietario del teatro, estaban las cocineras del restaurante, y Teltscher trepó al escenario para hacer una demostración de las reglas de la lucha grecorromana sobre una colchoneta blanda colocada allí. Después pidió que subieran dos de ellas para ensayar, pero ninguna quería; se daban codazos unas a otras entre risitas, empujaban a una, empujaban a otra, y la empujada retrocedía y se volvía a refugiar en el grupo.

Finalmente se decidieron dos, pero cuando Teltscher se dispuso a enseñarles los primeros ataques, se limitaron a reír, dejaron caer los brazos y no se atrevieron a agarrarse una a otra. Teltscher solicitó la intervención de una tercera, pero como se repitió la misma comedia, hizo que Esch leyera de nuevo los nombres e intentó, con jocosas observaciones, despertar en ellas la audacia y la valentía. Si sonaba un nombre francés, ensalzaba la audacia gala y pedía que «el orgullo de Francia» subiera al escenario; lo mismo hizo con «la gigante polaca», dando a entender, en resumen, con qué nombres honoríficos y sugestivos presentaría aquellas damas al público. Por fin algunas subieron al escenario, pero otras gritaban diciendo que, a pesar de todo, ellas no servían para aquello y que querían volver a vestirse, lo cual fue aceptado por Teltscher con manifestaciones de pesar y de cómica desesperación. Y todavía hubo más contratiempos: cuando Esch pronunció el nombre de Ruzena Hruska y Teltscher dijo: «¡Sube, leona de Bohemia!», se abrió paso hasta la rampa una mujer gorda y flácida, que todavía no se había desvestido, y con el tono gutural y cantarino de los de su país gritó que nadie se reía de ella por un cochino dinero: «Yo he tirado ya en mi vida mucho dinero, porque no me dejo tomar el pelo por bribones», siguió chillándole a Teltscher, y, mientras este buscaba una palabra chistosa con que salvar la situación, ella levantó su sombrilla como si fuera a pegarle. Pero luego se calló, sus redondeados y blandos hombros empezaron a agitarse, y todos se dieron cuenta de que estaba llorando. Cuando se volvió para dirigirse a la salida a través del silencioso pasillo que formaron las asustadas muchachas para dejarla pasar, su mirada se fijó en Esch, sentado tras una mesa con sus listas; se inclinó hacia él y musitó entre dientes: «Usted, usted es un mal amigo, me ha traído hasta aquí, a esta vergüenza». Después se fue llorando. Entretanto Teltscher se había adueñado nuevamente de la situación. El incidente tenía su lado bueno: las muchachas, como si se avergonzaran de su anterior jolgorio, se mostraron más dispuestas a trabajar en serio; Teltscher las alabó con entusiasmo y muy pronto olvidaron a la indómita checa. Incluso Esch dejó de pensar en los reproches que aquella mujer le había dirigido, aunque debía reconocer que, en efecto, era un mal amigo, pero se consoló enseguida: él obligaría a aquellos tipos a poner a Martin en libertad. Con esta idea en la cabeza se fue a su casa.

La señora Hentjen se sonó cuidadosamente la nariz y observó el resultado en el pañuelo. Esch le había contado el incidente con la impetuosa checa, tal vez por remordimiento, y la señora Hentjen le increpó con dureza diciendo que bien merecido habría tenido que aquella mujer, digna de compasión, le hubiera arrancado los ojos. Que estas cosas sucedían cuando se mezclaba uno suciamente con mujeres de tal calaña. Y que él no tenía dignidad. Una mujer que hubiera debido estarle agradecida por haberle proporcionado la oportunidad de ganar dinero. Este era su modo de dar las gracias. Pero aquella checa tenía toda la razón: era así como había que tratar a los hombres, no merecían nada mejor. ¡Divertirse viendo cómo un par de mujerotas en mallas se pegaban sobre un escenario! Aquellas mujeres eran diez veces mejores que aquellos hombres a los que debían tolerárselo todo. Y añadió mordaz: «Tire de una vez su cigarro».

Esch soportó respetuosamente todas sus imprecaciones, no solo porque ella le servía un abundante y magnífico almuerzo por una suma irrisoria, sino también porque consideraba que ella tenía derecho a sacar a relucir su vida pecaminosa: él lo merecía. Se encontraba en una situación apurada; de los trescientos marcos destinados a los combates solo le quedaban doscientos cincuenta y, aunque desde el primer día debía participar en las ganancias, no sabía a cuánto ascenderían. Necesitaba una ocupación lucrativa, si no quería que aquel sacrificio, hecho por Ilona aunque él casi lo había olvidado, terminara en una catástrofe; le hubiera gustado hablar de todo esto, pero su orgullo no se lo permitía, porque mamá Hentjen no estaba en condiciones de poder comprender que incluso la carrera más brillante puede tener unos comienzos muy duros. Por eso se limitó a decir:

—Mejor las luchas que lanzar cuchillos.

La señora Hentjen contempló el cuchillo que sostenía Esch; no entendía lo que él acababa de decir, pero le resultó desagradable. Así que contestó simplemente:

—Tal vez.

—Qué carne tan buena —dijo Esch inclinado sobre el plato.

—Solomillo —contestó ella con aire de experta.

—Y pensar el rancho que le dan ahora al pobre Martin…

—Solo les dan carne los domingos —dijo la señora Hentjen, y con ligera satisfacción añadió—: Los otros días comen fundamentalmente nabos.

¿Quién tenía la culpa de que Martin tuviera que comer nabos? ¿Por quién se sacrificaba? ¿Lo sabía el propio Martin? Martin era un mártir y consideraba su martirio como una profesión, en parte alegre, en parte amarga; pero a pesar de todo era un hombre cabal. La señora Hentjen dijo:

—Quien no quiere escuchar ha de sufrir.

Esch no respondió. Quizá Martin mantenía algo en secreto que solo él sabía; un mártir siempre tiene que sufrir en aras de alguna convicción, por alguna idea que le prescribe su conducta. Los mártires son personas serias. La señora Hentjen especificó:

—La causa está en los periódicos anarquistas.

—Sí —asintió Esch—, son una pandilla de cerdos; ahora le dejan en la estacada.

Desde luego el propio Martin se había reído de los periódicos socialistas, a pesar de que lo lógico era pensar que eran precisamente los más idóneos para defender las ideas socialistas. Así pues, ¿tiene Martin ideas socialistas o no? A Esch le molestaba que Martin le ocultase algo. Aquel que posee la verdad puede redimir a los demás; es lo que practicaron los mártires cristianos. Y, como se sentía muy orgulloso de su cultura, dijo: «En tiempo de los romanos también había luchas, solo que con leones. Corría la sangre. En Tréveris hay un circo romano». «¿Sí?», preguntó la señora Hentjen con curiosidad, pero, como no obtuviera respuesta, prosiguió: «¡Y esto es lo que usted quisiera introducir aquí! ¿Verdad?». Esch denegó con la cabeza sin pronunciar palabra. Si Martin sin convicciones, sin un conocimiento superior al de los demás, sin recibir la gratitud de nadie, se sacrificaba y comía nabos, era que se sacrificaba simplemente por sacrificarse, por el sacrificio en sí. Tal vez uno debía sacrificarse primero a fin de —¿cómo lo decía aquel idiota de Mannheim?— poder conocer la gracia de la redención. En este caso, quizá Ilona necesitaba los cuchillos, por amor al puro sacrificio, quién podía saberlo, y Esch sacó en conclusión: «Yo no quiero nada en absoluto. Tal vez todas las luchas sean una absoluta idiotez». «Efectivamente, eso es lo que son», dijo mamá Hentjen. Y él experimentó de nuevo por mamá Hentjen aquel profundo respeto que le hace a uno sentirse protegido.

Olía a comida y a humo de tabaco, y de vez en cuando se mezclaba un olor dulzón a vino. Mamá Hentjen tenía razón; las mujeres no deseaban otra cosa. Por eso Ilona se había aferrado a Korn. Y si este astuto lisiado sabe realmente más que los demás, no suelta prenda, no permite que nadie comparta su saber. Corre alborozado como un perro sobre tres patas, desaparece como un rayo por las esquinas o en la cárcel, y la cárcel causa en él tan poco efecto como los palos al perro. «Tal vez les divierte ser apaleados, ofrecerse en holocausto…», dijo meditabundo. «¿A quiénes?», preguntó mamá Hentjen interesada, «¿a las mujeres esas?» Esch lo pensó unos segundos: «Sí, a todos…». Mamá Hentjen estaba satisfecha: «¿Le traigo otro pedazo de carne?». Se fue a la cocina. La mujer checa le daba pena a Esch; lloraba de un modo tan dulce. Pero también aquí llevaba razón mamá Hentjen; tampoco la tal Hruska deseaba otra cosa. Y cuando la señora Hentjen regresó con el plato, él hizo una observación: «Bah, también esa mujer, la checa, se buscará su lanzador de

cuchillos». «Ya», dijo mamá Hentjen. «Pobre diablo», dijo Esch, y ni él mismo sabía si se refería a Martin o a la checa. Pero mamá Hentjen lo interpretó como alusión a esta última y replicó en tono mordaz: «Bueno, puede usted ir a consolarla, si tanta pena le da… vaya ahora mismo».

Esch no contestó. Había comido bien y se limitó a coger en silencio su periódico; empezó a leer con detenimiento los anuncios, la parte del periódico más importante para él desde que entre ellos figuraban los avisos de las luchas. Pero la leal contabilidad de su alma exigía que la señora Hentjen recibiera también su cuenta: ¿tenía acaso menos derecho a ello que Ilona, la cual incluso se oponía a que se hiciera algo por su bien? Su mirada se detuvo en un aviso sobre una subasta de vinos en St. Goar y preguntó a mamá Hentjen dónde encargaba ella los vinos. Mamá Hentjen le nombró un comerciante de Colonia; Esch frunció el ceño: «¡O sea que echa usted su dinero a las fauces de esa gente! ¿Por qué no me consultó al respecto? No puedo asegurar que en todas partes suceda lo mismo que en la tienducha de mi querido señor Nentwig, pero apostaría a que paga usted demasiado por sus vinos». Ella puso una cara atribulada, cuando se es una débil mujer y se está sola, hay que soportar muchas cosas. Esch le propuso ir él a St. Goar y comprar vino para ella. «Lástima de gastos», dijo mamá Hentjen. Esch se entusiasmó: los gastos se podrían cubrir fácilmente con los precios y, si la calidad era buena, se podía mezclar el vino con otro de calidad inferior; él entendía de estas cosas. Y, en definitiva, los gastos a él poco le importaban; una excursión remontando el Rin —le vino a la mente la idiota charlatanería de Lohberg sobre las bellezas de la naturaleza— constituía siempre un placer; por otra parte, ella no necesitaba reembolsarle los gastos hasta que el negocio se hubiera llevado a cabo ventajosamente. «Y usted llevará consigo a su checa, ¿no?», dijo mamá Hentjen desconfiada. La idea no le pareció despreciable, pero lo negó en voz alta e indignada; mamá Hentjen podía convencerse por sí misma y lo mejor que podía hacer era ir con él, precisamente ella había manifestado hacía poco tiempo que le gustaría disfrutar otra vez de la naturaleza; y se matarían así dos pájaros de un tiro, añadió Esch entusiasmado. Ella contempló su rostro, aquella tez oscuro-amarillenta, y se apartó de él mirándole con dureza: «¿Y quién se quedaría en la taberna?… No, esto no puede ser».

Bueno, en realidad, él no quería insistir: su estado financiero actual no le hubiera permitido realizar con desahogo una excursión acompañado; Esch no volvió pues a hablar de ello y mamá Hentjen recobró la confianza. Tomó el periódico, se acabó de tranquilizar al leer que la subasta no se celebraría hasta dentro de dos semanas y opinó que tenía tiempo para pensarlo. Muy bien, pues que lo pensara, dijo Esch secamente, y se levantó. Tenía que ir al Alhambra, donde Teltscher efectuaba los ensayos. Pasó por la calle en la que se encontraba el local donde trabajaba la mujer checa. Pero pedaleó con más fuerza en su bicicleta y siguió su camino.

El director Gernerth había llegado ya y Esch, designado por sus conocimientos en materia de expediciones de mercancías y empujado también por su afán de actividad, iba todos los días al puerto para preguntar por el material escénico que se había facturado vía fluvial por el Rin. Y tal vez solo iba hasta allí para, frente a los tinglados, saborear el remordimiento de haberse despedido de la Mittelrheinische, y poder sentir de nuevo como una espina en carne viva la existencia de Nentwig, a la vista de los depósitos destinados a vinos. Sin embargo no le disgustaba ver y revivir todo aquello, pues le hacía pensar que su sacrificio podía codearse con el de Martin. También el hecho de que Ilona, en lugar de acudir a Colonia, se hubiera quedado con Korn, entraba dentro del mismo círculo cerrado y parecía obedecer a un destino superior. Pero no hay que creer por eso que Esch fuera un apasionado del sufrimiento. ¡De ningún modo! En sus monólogos, no dejaba de calificar a Ilona de prostituta, de cochina prostituta incluso, y a Teltscher de rufián y de asesino. Y si hubiera encontrado al canalla de Nentwig entre las montañas de barriles, desde luego lo habría matado de una paliza. Pero cuando pasaba por delante de los extensos almacenes de la Mittelrheinische, y veía el cartel odiado de la firma, entonces, por encima de la sucia chusma de pequeños asesinos, se erguía una figura alta y distinguida, la figura de un hombre respetable, una figura que casi no podía considerarse humana, tan grande era y tan distante, pero que, sin embargo, era la imagen del superasesino; inefable y amenazadora se erguía la imagen de Bertrand, el puerco presidente de la compañía, el maricón que había llevado a Martin a la cárcel. Y esta figura aumentada y realmente inefable parecía absorber las de los dos pobres diablos, como si bastara con herir a este Anticristo para aniquilar a todos los insignificantes asesinos del mundo.

Naturalmente, a uno podía importarle un bledo todo esto, pues uno tenía preocupaciones mucho más serias; bastante miseria era el tener que vagar por el puerto sin ninguna compensación económica. El hombre que no tenga una ocupación remunerada merecía ser ajusticiado. Mamá Hentjen lo consideraría también así y resultaba agradable, en realidad, imaginar tal amenaza. Sí, lo más sensato sería que apareciera un superasesino perfecto y lo eliminara a uno limpiamente. Y cuando Esch recorrió otra vez el muelle, y se encontró de nuevo ante el letrero de la compañía naviera Mittelrheinische S. A., dijo en alta voz: «O él o yo».

Esch, de pie cerca del remolcador, observaba la descarga del material escénico. Vio acercarse a Teltscher con el sonrosado Oppenheimer: ambos avanzaban, por así decirlo, a sacudidas; se detenían a cada momento agarrándose por los botones o por los bordes de las chaquetas, y Esch se preguntó qué tendrían que discutir

tan acaloradamente los dos. Cuando estuvieron suficientemente cerca, oyó a Teltscher: «Se lo digo yo, Oppenheimer, este negocio no está hecho para mí. Ya lo verá; hago venir a Ilona y que me corten la cabeza si antes de medio año no he presentado el número en Nueva York». Vaya, vaya, o sea que Teltscher no había renunciado todavía a Ilona. Bueno, ya hablaría de otro modo cuando al fin se impusiera un poco de orden. Y Esch perdió las ganas de morirse. Increpó a los dos hombres preguntándoles qué buscaban ellos aquí, acaso creían que él nunca había dirigido una operación de descarga, o pensaban que quería llevarse algo… ¿O tal vez los señores pretendían controlarle? Lo que más lamentaba era haber hecho invertir dinero a otras personas en el negocio, para no mencionar el suyo. Llevaba casi un mes trabajando gratis para esta dudosa empresa, lo había dado todo… ¿Y por qué? Porque un tal señor Teltscher, que por su parte estaba pensando ya en tomar las de Villadiego, le había embarcado. Completamente furioso, empezó a imitar, aunque muy mal, el típico deje judaico del señor Oppenheimer. «Es un antisemita», dijo el señor Oppenheimer, y Teltscher opinó que el humor del señor encargado de los trabajos de expedición mejoraría sin duda al cabo de dos días, en cuanto se hubiera hecho el primer recuento de caja. Y como él sí estaba de buen humor y quería embromar a Esch, dio la vuelta en torno al vehículo donde habían sido cargados los bultos, los contó con minuciosidad y luego se acercó a los caballos para darles un poco de azúcar que tenía en el bolsillo. Esch, que había dado la espalda a los dos judíos, furioso y ofendido, mientras anotaba los cajones, lo vio de reojo y le sorprendió el gesto magnánimo de Teltscher; en realidad se negaba a creerlo y casi esperaba que los animales rechazaran el obsequio. Pero los caballos, precisamente porque así son los caballos, tomaron alegremente con su blando hocico el azúcar de la palma de la mano de Teltscher, y Esch se molestó: también a él se le habría podido ocurrir llevarles al menos un pedazo de pan; evidentemente, al terminar la operación, no quedaba otra opción que propinar una suave palmada a los dos caballos en las ancas. Esch así lo hizo, y después todos, sentados sobre las cajas, regresaron en el carro a la ciudad. Oppenheimer se despidió en el puente del Rin; Teltscher y Esch siguieron adelante, camino de la taberna de mamá Hentjen.

Teltscher había estado alguna vez en la taberna y se comportaba como si fuera un cliente habitual. Esch tenía cierto sentimiento de culpabilidad por haberle llevado a mamá Hentjen un tipo de tal calaña… en lugar de algo mejor. Le hubiera gustado tirar del carro a aquel individuo. Se sentaba en el mismo sitio que Martin, como un judas, y no tenía ni idea de que existieran hombres mucho mejores que él, hombres distinguidos, respetables. Tampoco tenía idea de que Martin había caído a causa de un hombre que no se dignaría ni escupirle a un lanzador de cuchillos. Y ese bribón, ese rufián, adoptaba aires de triunfador, como si le correspondiera ocupar el sitio de Martin. ¡Artimañas de prestidigitador! Hacer juegos malabares con cosas muertas, trabajo estéril lleno de mentiras y engaños.

Habían llegado. Teltscher descendió el primero. Esch le gritó: «¡Muy bonito! ¿Y quién descarga? Controlar, espiar, esas cosas sí le gustan, pero en cuanto hay que trabajar de verdad, se echa usted para atrás». «Tengo hambre», replicó Teltscher con sencillez al tiempo que entraba en el local. No había nada que hacer con aquel judío; Esch le siguió encogiéndose de hombros. Y a fin de patentizar que él eludía toda responsabilidad por esta clase de clientes, dijo en tono de broma: «Le traigo un cliente distinguido, mamá Hentjen; de los mejores». Pero de pronto estuvo de acuerdo con todo: que Teltscher se sentara en el sitio de Martin y Martin en el sitio de Nentwig: uno ignoraba el fondo de la cuestión y en cierto modo las cosas estaban en orden. Hasta cierto punto no importaban ya los hombres, pues todos eran iguales y bien poco importaba que uno se fundiera en otro o que uno ocupara el sitio de otro; no, ya no podía establecerse un orden en el mundo partiendo de la división entre hombres buenos y malos, sino que había que hacerlo según determinadas fuerzas buenas o malas. Observó a Teltscher con mirada venenosa: Teltscher hacía juegos malabares con el cuchillo y el tenedor y anunció que iba a sacar un cuchillo del corpiño de mamá Hentjen. Ella se echó hacia atrás con un grito, pero Teltscher mostraba ya el cuchillo entre el pulgar y el índice: «¡Pero mamá Hentjen, qué cosas lleva usted dentro del corpiño!». Después quiso hipnotizarla, pero ella quedó petrificada de antemano. Lo que es demasiado, es demasiado. Esch se dirigió indignado a Teltscher: «Es a usted a quien habría que meter en la cárcel». «Vaya novedad», respondió Teltscher. «El hipnotismo está prohibido por la ley», rugió Esch. «Un hombre muy interesante», dijo Teltscher, señalando con la barbilla a Esch y solicitando con su gesto que también mamá Hentjen se burlara de aquel hombre interesante. Pero a mamá Hentjen no se le había ido aún el susto del cuerpo y se limitó a retocarse el peinado mirando al vacío. Esch se dio cuenta de que su acción salvadora había tenido éxito y se sintió satisfecho. Sí, había dejado escapar a uno, a Nentwig, pero la segunda vez no sucedería igual: aunque no dependa de la persona, aunque un ser se funda en otro, aunque sea imposible distinguir a un hombre de otro, la injusticia existe, independientemente de quien la cometa, y la injusticia debe ser expiada.

Cuando más tarde fue al Alhambra con Teltscher, estaba de buen humor. Había adquirido un nuevo saber. Y casi le daba pena Teltscher. Y también Bertrand. Incluso Nentwig.

Por fin, a base de incordias a Gernerth, Esch había conseguido que se le garantizara una ganancia de cien marcos al mes por su colaboración —¿de qué debía vivir si no?—, pero la noche del estreno le proporcionó ya

una ganancia de siete marcos. De seguir así, duplicaría en un mes su aportación. No hubo forma de convencer a la señora Hentjen de que asistiera a la primera representación, y Esch, a la hora del almuerzo, explicó muy excitado el éxito obtenido el día anterior. Cuando llegó al punto que podría decirse culminante, en que relató cómo Teltscher había hecho cortar y luego coser una de las mallas, a fin de que durante la lucha estallara en el punto más redondeado, y aseguró que dicho incidente se repetiría todas las noches, y se reía tanto al explicarlo que, incapaz de seguir hablando, tuvo que hacer gestos que suplieran las palabras, la señora Hentjen se levantó y dijo que aquello era demasiado. Era inaudito que un hombre al que ella había considerado honorable y que antes había tenido una profesión digna, pudiera caer tan bajo. Y se retiró a la cocina.

Esch, perplejo, se secó los ojos, húmedos todavía por lo mucho que se había reído. En un rincón de su corazón se hospedaba el remordimiento y este rincón le daba la razón a mamá Hentjen; las mallas que estallaban en el escenario tenían una oscura relación con los cuchillos que ya no se podían lanzar en él, pero de esto mamá Hentjen no tenía ni idea, y por eso, en realidad, su ira resultaba incomprensible. Sentía respeto hacia ella, no quería insultarla como al idiota de Lohberg, pero seguro que ella se habría entendido mucho mejor con Lohberg, y evidentemente él no era tan fino como Lohberg. Observó el retrato del señor Hentjen que había en la repisa, para ver si tenía alguna semejanza con Lohberg, y, cuando lo hubo mirado un rato, los rostros del difunto tabernero y del comerciante de tabaco de Mannheim se fundieron en uno. Sí, se mirara como se mirara, resultaba evidente que una persona se fundía en otra y ni siquiera era posible diferenciar a un muerto de un vivo. Nadie es lo que cree ser: uno cree que es un tipo con los pies muy firmes en el suelo, que recoge sus ganancias de siete marcos y que hace lo que quiere, y la realidad es que unas veces está en un sitio y otras en otro y que incluso cuando se sacrifica no es uno mismo quien se ha sacrificado. Le invadió un ansia incontenible de demostrar que no era así, que no podía ser así y, aunque no pudiera demostrárselo a nadie, tenía que hacerle ver al menos a aquella mujer de allá dentro que no debía confundirle a él con el señor Lohberg ni con el señor Hentjen. Sin reflexionarlo más se dirigió a la cocina y le dijo a la señora Hentjen que no olvidara la subasta de vinos de St. Goar el viernes siguiente. «Encontrará usted compañía sin ninguna dificultad», replicó la señora Hentjen de pie frente al fogón. Esta respuesta le molestó. ¿Qué pretendía de él? ¿Acaso debía pronunciar solo las palabras que ella le indicara y que ella quería oír? No pudo evitar el pensar en la pianola de la taberna, que cualquiera podía manejar. Pero a ella no le gustaba aquella máquina. Si la criada no hubiera estado presente, le habría gustado vencerla por la fuerza, allí mismo, tal como estaba, tan tiesa junto al fogón, solo para convencerla de que él existía. Pero se limitó a decir: «Ya lo he arreglado todo: iremos en tren hasta Bacharach y desde allí en barco hasta St. Goar. Llegaremos hacia las once, a tiempo para la subasta. Por la tarde podríamos subir a la Lorelei». A ella le asustó un poco la firmeza de aquella decisión, pero se esforzó en adoptar un tono burlón: «Grandes planes, señor Esch». Esch recobró la seguridad en sí mismo: «Esto es solo el comienzo, mamá Hentjen; la próxima semana habré ganado, en cualquier caso, mis buenos cien marcos». Y salió de la cocina silbando.

Una vez fuera, se entretuvo leyendo los periódicos que había traído y subrayó con lápiz rojo los artículos que comentaban la sesión inaugural. Le molestó no encontrar nada en el *Volkswacht*. Dejar que se pudriera en la cárcel un camarada del partido, un amigo, eso sí podían hacerlo. Pero, en cambio, no podían escribir ni un miserable artículo. También aquí sería necesario imponer orden. Sintió en sus adentros que poseía fuerza suficiente para hacerlo y tuvo la certeza de que lograría atravesar y dominar aquel caos en el que todo estaba oprimido por el sufrimiento, caos en el que amigos y enemigos se mezclaban encarnizadamente pero sin lucha.

Al cruzar la sala durante el descanso, sufrió un gran sobresalto y le vinieron a la memoria las palabras «una espina en el corazón»: había visto a Nentwig. Estaba en una mesa con otras cuatro personas, y una de las luchadoras, con un albornoz encima de la malla, se había sentado entre ellos. El albornoz se abría un poco y Nentwig procuraba abrirlo más con ladinos movimientos de sus manos regordetas. Esch pasó junto a ellos con el rostro vuelto hacia otro lado, pero la muchacha le llamó y tuvo que volverse. «¡Vaya, señor Esch!, ¿qué hace usted aquí?», oyó decir a Nentwig. Esch titubeó; dijo únicamente: «Noches», pero Nentwig no comprendió la repulsa que encerraba su actitud y levantó la copa hacia él; la chica dijo: «Le dejo el sitio, señor Esch; tengo que volver al escenario». Nentwig, que había bebido bastante, retuvo la mano de Esch y, mientras le servía una copa, lo miraba con dulces ojos de borracho: «Vaya, vaya, eso sí que es una sorpresa inesperada». Esch dijo que él también debía ir al escenario, y Nentwig, sin soltarle la mano, rió sonoramente: «¿Al escenario con las mujeres? Yo también voy, yo también voy». Esch intentó hacerle comprender que él estaba allí por razones profesionales. Finalmente Nentwig lo entendió: «¿O sea que está usted empleado aquí? ¿Es un buen empleo?». La dignidad de Esch no le permitía contestar afirmativamente a la pregunta; no, no estaba empleado aquí, tenía parte en el negocio. «¿Sí?», dijo Nentwig sorprendido. «Tiene un negocio, buen negocio, seguro que es un buen negocio», recorrió con la mirada la sala llena de bote en bote, «y se olvida de que existe un viejo amigo llamado Nentwig a quien siempre le ha gustado tomar parte en cosas así.» Recobró totalmente la lucidez: «¿Y cómo va el suministro de vinos, Esch?». Esch le aclaró que él no tenía nada que ver con el bar, que de esto se ocupaba el propietario de la sala. «Bien, bien, pero con todo lo demás», y abarcó con un amplio

gesto la sala y el escenario, «sí tiene usted que ver, ¿no? Bueno, beba al menos una copa», y Esch no pudo negarse a chocar su copa con la de Nentwig y tuvo que estrechar la mano a sus acompañantes y beber con ellos. Pese a la trampa en que Nentwig le había atrapado, no podía experimentar hacia aquel hombre el odio a que se sentía obligado. Intentó revivir el delito del apoderado; no lo consiguió; habían sido unas cochinadas en los balances, unas tremendas cochinadas, y Esch se irguió ligeramente para localizar al policía que se encontraba en la sala. Pero todo este asunto se había tornado de pronto tan extrañamente impalpable y borroso que Esch se dio cuenta inmediatamente de cuán absurda era su intención y, algo avergonzado y confuso, cogió su copa con mano temblorosa. Entretanto Nentwig miraba a su antiguo y buen contable con ojos húmedos y a Esch le pareció que mediante esta mirada húmeda pretendía fundir su gordinflona figura y transformarla en algo indiferente e insignificante. Aquel vendedor de vinos le había acusado alevosamente de cometer faltas en la contabilidad; le había querido quitar el pan y la existencia, y siempre seguiría acuchillándole por la espalda. No obstante, era casi imposible continuar odiándole. De la confusa maraña de los acontecimientos surge un brazo, un puño que sostiene un puñal, y, en cuanto uno descubre que se trata del brazo de Nentwig, el hecho se convierte en una tonta y casi mezquina casualidad. La muerte a manos de un Nentwig apenas podría llamarse asesinato, y un juicio contra Nentwig no sería más que una miserable venganza por un error de contabilidad que no era tal error. No, de nada sirve entregar un apoderado a la justicia, pues no se trata de arrancar un brazo, ni aunque este brazo sostenga un puñal amenazador; se trata de herir a todo el conjunto o de cortar al menos una cabeza. Una voz interior le dijo a Esch: «Aquel que se sacrifica es un hombre formal», y decidió no preocuparse más de Nentwig. El pequeño gordinflón había caído de nuevo en la somnolencia y, cuando se oyeron los primeros compases de la marcha de los gladiadores, a cuyos sones subieron las luchadoras al escenario capitaneadas por Teltscher, Nentwig no se dio cuenta de que Esch había desaparecido de su mesa.

Gernerth estaba sentado en el despacho de la dirección frente a un vaso de cerveza y, cuando Esch entró, decía en tono quejumbroso: «¡Qué vida esta, Dios, esto no es vida!». Oppenheimer iba y venía moviendo la cabeza y todo el cuerpo: «Me gustaría saber qué le pone a usted tan nervioso». Gernerth tenía el bloc de notas abierto ante sí: «Los impuestos le devoran a uno. ¿Para qué nos matamos trabajando? ¡Pues para los impuestos!». Fuera chasqueaban los manotazos sobre los sudorosos cuerpos grasientos de las luchadoras, y a Esch le indignó que aquí dentro alguien hablara de matarse trabajando cuando solo echaba cuentas en un bloc. Gernerth continuó lamentándose: «Ahora los niños tienen que ir de vacaciones; esto cuesta dinero… ¿Y de dónde he de sacarlo?». Oppenheimer se mostró comprensivo sobre este punto: «Los hijos son una bendición, pero los hijos son también un tormento; todo se arreglará, no se preocupe demasiado». Esch sentía compasión por Gernerth, que era un buen tipo, y sin embargo, la marcha del mundo resultaba otra vez confusa si uno pensaba que allá fuera tenía que romperse ahora una malla a fin de que los hijos de Gernerth pudieran ir de vacaciones. En cierto modo mamá Hentjen tenía razón al sentir tanta repugnancia, claro que en un aspecto que ella misma ignoraba. Esch tampoco lo sabía; tal vez era la falta de orden lo que provocaban en él repugnancia e irritación. Salió de la estancia; entre bastidores había algunas luchadoras y olían a sudor; Esch, para abrirse paso, las agarraba desde atrás por los rollizos brazos o los pechos, y las apretaba contra su vientre, y algunas rieron excitadas. Después entró en el escenario y ocupó su puesto de secretario en la mesa del jurado. Teltscher, con el silbato en los labios, estaba casi echado en el suelo y miraba con suma atención por debajo del puente que formaba el cuerpo de una de las luchadoras mientras la otra rodaba sobre ella y se esforzaba, aparentemente, en derrumbar dicho puente; por supuesto solo aparentemente, ya que la que estaba debajo era la alemana, y una de sus obligaciones consistía en liberarse rápidamente con un patriótico empujón de aquel aprieto humillante. Y aunque Esch conocía el truco, no pudo evitar un suspiro de alivio cuando la luchadora que parecía vencida se puso en pie, y sintió profunda e indignada compasión por su adversaria, cuando Irmentraud Kroff se echó sobre ella y la retuvo por los hombros contra la colchoneta, entre el júbilo nacional de la sala.

Cuando la señora Hentjen se levantó, empezaba a amanecer. Abrió la ventana para mirar qué tiempo hacía. El cielo se extendía claro y despejado por encima del patio todavía en sombras, un pequeño cuadrado entre los oscuros muros, en inmóvil silencio frente a ella. Las tinas, por ser día de colada, emitían calladas allá abajo una nota de color. Un aire fresco se introducía por entre los muros y traía el olor a ciudad. Se dirigió a la habitación de la criada arrastrando los pies y llamó a la puerta. No quería irse sin desayunar, solo faltaría eso. Después se arregló cuidadosamente y se puso el traje de seda oscura. Cuando Esch acudió a recogerla, la encontró sentada de mal talante en el salón ante una taza de café. Hoscamente dijo: «Vamos», pero al llegar a la puerta, se le ocurrió que tal vez Esch quisiera también tomar café; se lo sirvieron a toda prisa en la cocina y lo bebió de pie. En la calle lucía ya el sol, pero los claros rayos que se reflejaban sobre el asfalto interrumpiendo las alargadas sombras de las casas no mejoraron el humor de ninguno de los dos. Esch se limitaba a dar algunas escuetas indicaciones: «Yo me ocupo de los billetes», o «Andén número cinco». Se sentaron uno junto a otro en el compartimiento, pero en Bonn Esch asomó la cabeza por la ventanilla,

preguntó si había pan recién hecho y le compró un panecillo. Ella lo devoró con aire malhumorado y lleno de reproches. Cerca de Coblenza, cuando la gente se acercó como siempre a las ventanillas para admirar el panorama del Rin, la señora Hentjen sintió el impulso de hacer lo mismo. Esch, en cambio, no se movió de su sitio; conocía de sobras la región; además, tenía la intención de no mostrar la naturaleza a la señora Hentjen hasta que estuvieran en el barco. Le irritó que ella disfrutara ya ahora de la naturaleza y sobre todo que prestara atención a las instructivas aclaraciones de un compañero de viaje. Por eso le resultaron agradables los túneles que impedían disfrutar de la vista y su enfado aumentó hasta tal punto que en Ober-Wesel la llamó sin más para alejarla de la ventanilla: «Estuve en Ober-Wesel, en calidad de…». La señora Hentjen miró hacia fuera; la estación no tenía nada de particular. Dijo cortésmente: «Sí, uno da tantas vueltas…». Esch no había terminado: «Un empleo miserable, pero aguanté, dos meses, a causa de una muchacha del lugar… Huida se llamaba». «Pues podía apearse e ir a visitarla», fue la agria respuesta de la señora Hentjen, por ella no debía privarme de nada. Pero entretanto habían llegado a Bacharach, y Esch, por primera vez en su vida, experimentó el desamparo del que viaja por placer y se encuentra en una estación con una hora de tiempo por delante. De acuerdo con su programa hubieran debido desayunar en el pequeño vapor, y solo por confusión propuso entrar en alguno de los cafés que conocía. Cuando penetraron en las estrechas callejas de la población, silenciosas y familiares bajo el claro sol de la mañana, la señora Hentjen, de pronto, exclamó entusiasmada ante una casa de paredes entramadas: «Aquí sí que me gustaría vivir, sería mi ideal». Tal vez habían despertado en ella tal entusiasmo las flores de las ventanas, tal vez se debía simplemente a la sensación de libertad que con frecuencia se apodera del ser humano cuando se encuentra frente a lo desconocido, o tal vez fuera únicamente que su mal humor se había agotado. Lo cierto es que el mundo les parecía más transparente y empezaron a mirarlo todo en buena armonía, incluso subieron hasta las ruinas de la iglesia, donde, por cierto, se encontraron sin saber qué hacer; se dieron prisa para llegar pronto al embarcadero, a fin de no perder el vapor, y no les importó tener que esperar media hora.

Durante la travesía discutieron más de una vez, pues a la larga el orgullo de la señora Hentjen no podía permitir que fuese únicamente Esch el conocedor de la región. Ella buscaba y rebuscaba en su memoria nombres conocidos, empezó a dar también datos o a lanzar suposiciones con el brazo extendido, y se ofendió cuando la exactitud de él no dejó pasar alguno de los errores. Sin embargo, nada de esto pudo atenuar su renacido buen humor y, cuando llegaron a St. Goar, les dio pena tener que dejar el barco; sí, en el primer momento ni siquiera recordaron para qué estaban allí. La finalidad comercial del viaje les resultaba ahora en cierto modo indiferente y, cuando se enteraron en el local de la subasta de que la venta de los vinos baratos que a ellos les interesaban ya se había celebrado, no lo lamentaron, antes bien les pareció que se les liberaba de una obligación y consideraron mucho más importante tomar la balsa que, guiada por un largo cable tendido entre las orillas, iba hasta el atrayente Goarshausen bañado por el sol. Y cuando Esch, fingiendo el interés de un comerciante consumado, anotó los precios alcanzados en la subasta, «para otra ocasión», según dijo, esta actitud comercial resultó un poco fraudulenta, cosa que le produjo un curioso remordimiento, remordimiento que, por una parte, le obligó a pasar por alto los precios demasiado ventajosos, pero por otra no le dejó tranquilo, de modo que, ya en la balsa, anotó de memoria los precios que había omitido antes y lanzó a la señora Hentjen miradas de disgusto.

La señora Hentjen, sentada en el borde de la balsa calentado por el sol, metía tranquilamente un dedo en el agua, cuidando de que sus mitones de encaje color crema no se mojaran, y, si de ella hubiera dependido, habrían cruzado el Rin varias veces más, porque le gustaba aquella extraña sensación de ligero mareo que producía mirar oblicuamente el agua que corría veloz junto a la balsa. Pero el tiempo transcurría con rapidez y había que reconocer que también se estaba muy bien en la terraza del restaurante bajo la sombra de los árboles. Comieron pescado, bebieron vino, y Esch, en trance de fumarse un cigarro, pensó en la necesidad de iniciar una ofensiva, preguntándose muy en serio si la señora Hentjen, sentada ahí, magnífica en su corpulencia, no estaría esperando que él la iniciara. Desde luego, no era como las demás mujeres, y por eso, precavido, empezó hablando de Lohberg, a quien en realidad tenía que agradecer la idea de esta hermosa excursión, y lo colmó de alabanzas, para, tras esta introducción, abordar el tema de los ideales vegetarianos del verdadero amor, pero la señora Hentjen se dio cuenta de su propósito, reaccionó de inmediato y, aunque ella acusaba también el cansancio y hubiera preferido descansar, le cortó la palabra y le recordó que, de acuerdo con sus planes, ahora tenían que ir a la Lorelei. Esch se puso furioso; se esforzaba en hablar como Lohberg y no hallaba el menor reconocimiento. Por lo visto, él no era todavía lo bastante delicado para ella.

Se levantó y pagó la cuenta. Al atravesar el jardín del restaurante, observó a los clientes veraniegos; había hermosas mujeres y muchachas jóvenes: de repente Esch no comprendió qué pretendía él con aquella mujer ya entrada en años, aunque con su vestido de seda marrón tuviera un porte realmente majestuoso. Las muchachas llevaban vaporosos y claros vestidos de verano, y el traje de seda marrón se ensució pronto con el polvo de las calles y quedó feo. A pesar de todo, a Esch le parecía bien, uno tenía conciencia y si se pensaba en Martin, pudriéndose en una cárcel sin sol por haberse sacrificado sin que nadie se lo agradeciera, se daba uno cuenta de que las cosas le iban todavía demasiado bien. Y mientras pateaba las polvorientas calles del pueblo en compañía de la señora Hentjen, en lugar de estar tendido en la hierba junto a una mujer hermosa,

le parecía justo que aquella mujer no supiera agradecerle el sacrificio. Aquel que se sacrifica es un hombre cabal. Reflexionó sobre si podía hacerle ver a ella, delicadamente, su sacrificio, pero se acordó de Lohberg y desistió: un hombre sensible se sacrifica en silencio. Algún día —quizá cuando fuera demasiado tarde— ella comprendería. Sintió una dolorosa emoción y, mientras seguía andando, se quitó la chaqueta y luego el chaleco. La señora Hentjen constató, con asco, que había dos grandes manchas húmedas en la camisa y que esta se le pegaba a los sobacos, y cuando él, al tomar el camino del bosque, se detuvo para esperarla, ella notó el calenturiento olor que desprendía su cuerpo y se echó hacia atrás. Esch dijo en tono complaciente:

—¿Cómo va eso, mamá Hentjen?

—Póngase la chaqueta —suplicó ella ásperamente, pero maternal añadió—: Aquí hace fresco y aunque sea un fresco agradable podría usted enfriarse.

—Al andar se siente el calor —respondió Esch—, sería mejor que se desabrochara usted algún botón del cuello.

Ella movió la cabeza con el sombrerito pasado de moda y bien cepillado: no, de ningún modo ¡qué aspecto tendría! «Pero si aquí no nos ve nadie», dijo Esch, y la comprobación repentina de esta soledad en compañía, en la que uno no debía avergonzarse ante el otro puesto que nadie los veía, turbó a la mujer. De pronto le pareció hasta lógico, por así decirlo, que él desnudara su sudor ante ella con entera confianza; y, aunque todavía sentía repugnancia, ya no la sentía exteriormente, sino por debajo de la piel, de forma apagada y diluida, y ni siquiera tenía miedo ya de la mandíbula de caballo de Esch, sino que la aceptaba como parte integrante de aquella extraña libertad, libertad que se puso nuevamente de manifiesto cuando él volvió a hablar entre risas: «Ánimo, mamá Hentjen, no nos abandonemos a la fatiga». Ella se ofendió porque él, evidentemente, no la creía capaz de mantener su paso, y se puso de nuevo en movimiento un poco sofocada y apoyándose en su frágil sombrilla rosa. Esch caminaba ahora a su lado y cuando el camino se hizo muy empinado intentó ayudarla. Ella le miró primero con desconfianza, temiendo una familiaridad totalmente impropia, pero luego, aunque dudando, se cogió vacilante de su brazo, a pesar de que renunciaba a este apoyo, y lo rechazaba, en cuanto alguien se cruzaba en su camino, incluso si este alguien era solo un niño.

Ascendían con lentitud, y cuando se detuvieron para recobrar aliento empezaron a darse cuenta poco a poco de cuanto les rodeaba: el barro del sendero del bosque que, con el calor, se había agrietado y tornado blanquecino; las plantas, que escondían su verde pálido en el suelo reseco, las raíces, que tendían sus fibras polvorientas sobre el camino; el olor seco y marchito del bosque, que apenas respiraba bajo el calor; los arbustos, entre cuyas hojas se vislumbraban bayas negras y muertas, prontas ya a agostarse en el otoño. Todo lo descubrían, aunque sin ser capaces de expresarlo, pero cuando llegaron al primer banco situado en un mirador, se extendió ante ellos todo el valle y, aunque les faltaba mucho para alcanzar la cima de la roca Lorelei, les pareció, cuando tomaron asiento y se abrió ante ellos toda la amplitud del paisaje, que habían alcanzado ya la meta; y la señora Hentjen alisó con sumo cuidado su vestido de seda marrón por la parte de atrás a fin de que no se arrugara bajo su peso. El silencio era tal que se oían las voces procedentes del embarcadero y de las posadas de St. Goar y hasta el sordo ruido que hacía la balsa al chocar contra el muelle; y lo desacostumbrado de tales impresiones les resultó a los dos desagradable. La señora Hentjen miraba los corazones y las iniciales grabados en el respaldo y en el asiento del banco y con voz opaca le preguntó si él también había inmortalizado aquí su nombre junto al de su Hulda de Ober-Wesel. Cuando él, bromeando, empezó a buscarlos, ella dijo que lo dejara correr: se viera o no, allí donde un hombre llegaba, encontraba siempre la huella de su cochino pasado. Pero Esch, que deseaba proseguir la broma, dijo que tal vez lo que encontraría sería el nombre de ella escrito dentro de un corazón, y esto la enojó de verdad; ¿qué más se permitiría?; su pasado, a Dios gracias, era puro, y en este sentido podía competir con cualquier jovencilla. Claro que esto, desde luego, no podía comprenderlo un hombre que se había pasado la vida persiguiendo a mujerzuelas. Esch, a quien el reproche le llegó al alma, se sintió vil y vulgar por haberla juzgado inferior a las muchachas que había visto en el restaurante, muchas de las cuales, de seguro, no le llegaban a mamá Hentjen ni a la suela del zapato. Además le hacía a él un gran bien tener junto a sí a alguien que se manifestaba con esta claridad y con esta seguridad, alguien que sabía perfectamente dónde tenía la derecha y dónde tenía la izquierda, dónde estaba el bien y dónde estaba el mal. Por unos instantes pensó que ahí estaba la meta anhelada, la cúspide que se erguía clara y firme por encima del desorden, el puntal al que uno podía agarrarse, pero entonces le importunó la imagen del señor Hentjen y su retrato colocado en la taberna y le entró la obsesión de que el corazón de aquel hombre tenía que estar grabado en alguna parte abarcando, en íntima unión, las iniciales de él y de ella. No se atrevió a tocar este tema y preguntó simplemente dónde estaba su casa paterna. Ella respondió con sequedad que había nacido en Westfalia y que, por otra parte, esto no le importaba a nadie. Y, como no podía retocarse el peinado, se afianzó bien el sombrero. No, mamá Hentjen no podía soportar que la gente metiera la nariz en la vida de los demás, y eso era precisamente lo que hacían los hombres como Esch y otros clientes parecidos, los cuales eran incapaces de imaginar que no todo el mundo anda por ahí arrastrando un cochino pasado. Cuando esos tipos no pueden conseguir a una mujer, tratan por lo menos de inventarle una vida amorosa y un pasado. Se apartó un poco de él enojada, y Esch, cuyo pensamiento seguía ocupándose del señor Hentjen, tuvo de pronto la seguridad de que ella había sido

muy desgraciada. El rostro de Esch adquirió una expresión de amarga pesadumbre. Era muy posible que la hubieran llevado a ese matrimonio por la fuerza. Esch dijo que no había tenido intención de molestarla. Y, habituado a consolar mediante un contacto físico a las mujeres que lloraban o que le parecían desgraciadas, cogió su mano y la acarició. Tal vez debido a la extraordinaria quietud de la naturaleza, o quizá simplemente por puro cansancio, ella no se defendió. Había manifestado su opinión, pero ya las últimas palabras habían volado de su boca como plumas deshilachadas, y ni ella misma las reconocía, y ahora se sentía completamente vacía, incapaz de sentir aversión o repugnancia. Miró el ancho valle sin verlo; dejó de saber dónde estaba. Todos aquellos años vividos maquinalmente entre el mostrador y un par de calles conocidas se fundían ahora en un pequeño punto y parecía de pronto que hubiera estado fija desde siempre en este punto desconocido. Y el mundo todo le era tan desconocido que era imposible abarcarlo, y ya nada la unía al mundo, como no fuera la delgada rama de hojitas punzantes que colgaba sobre el respaldo del banco y que ella recorría con los dedos de la mano izquierda. Esch se preguntó si debía besarla, pero no le apetecía y, además, le pareció poco delicado.

Así pues siguieron sentados en silencio. El sol se inclinaba hacia el oeste y brillaba en sus rostros, pero mamá Hentjen no notaba el calor ni el ardor de su piel tensa, enrojecida y cubierta de polvo. Casi parecía que hubiera contagiado a Esch su sopor y somnolencia, ya que este, si bien veía cómo se iba alargando y ensanchando la sombra de la montaña que se proyectaba sobre el valle, no se atrevía a cambiar de postura, hasta que finalmente, con gesto indeciso, cogió la chaqueta que tenía junto a sí y consultó su gran reloj de plata. Era hora de volver al tren, y ella, convertida en una mujer sin voluntad, le obedeció. Durante el descenso ella se apoyó con fuerza en su brazo y él se puso sobre el hombro la frágil sombrilla rosa, con la chaqueta y el chaleco colgados en la punta. A fin de facilitarle la marcha, Esch le desabrochó un par de botones del corpiño, abotonado hasta muy arriba, y mamá Hentjen le dejó hacer sin rechistar, y tampoco se apartó de su lado cuando se cruzaron con otros viandantes; ella no los veía. El borde de su traje de seda marrón rozaba el polvo del camino, y cuando Esch, ya en la estación, la dejó sentada en un banco para ir a beber algo, ella permaneció quieta, desamparada y abúlica, esperando que él regresara. Esch le trajo un vaso de cerveza y mamá Hentjen bebió a instancias suyas. En el oscuro compartimiento del tren, él acomodó la cabeza de la mujer en su hombro. No sabía si mamá Hentjen dormía, y tampoco ella lo sabía. Su cabeza rodaba de un lado a otro sobre el hombro duro. El gesto de Esch para atraerla hacia sí provocó una firme resistencia en aquel ancho cuerpo en su coraza de ballenas, y los alfileres del sombrero que se sostenía sobre su vacilante cabeza amenazaban el rostro de Esch, que tomando de pronto una decisión, echó el sombrero para atrás. El pelo desordenado y el sombrero hacia atrás hicieron que la mujer adquiriera aspecto de borracha. La seda del vestido olía a polvo y a calor, solo de vez en cuando se notaba el perfume de lavanda que había quedado aprisionada entre las arrugas. Esch besó la mejilla que se deslizaba junto a su boca, y luego cogió con las manos la cabeza redonda y pesada y la volvió hacia él. Ella devolvió el beso con labios secos y abultados, como un animal que oprime el hocico contra un cristal.

Solo cuando estuvieron en la puerta de su casa, recobró ella la lucidez. Dio a Esch un empujón en el pecho y con pasos todavía inseguros fue a ocupar su puesto detrás del mostrador. Allí se sentó y paseó la mirada por el local que se extendía ante ella como sumergido en espesa niebla. Finalmente reconoció a Wrobek en la primera mesa y le dijo «Buenas noches, señor Wrobek». Pero no vio que Esch la había seguido hasta el interior de la taberna, ni tampoco advirtió que fue uno de los últimos en abandonar el local. Cuando él la saludó para despedirse, contestó en tono indiferente: «Buenas noches, señores». Sin embargo, al salir de la taberna, Esch notaba una sensación extraña y halagadora: la impresión de que era el amante de mamá Hentjen.

Cuando se ha besado una vez a una mujer, todo lo demás sucede de modo necesario e irrevocable. Se puede precipitar o retrasar, pero no se puede abolir una ley de la naturaleza. Esch lo sabía perfectamente. Pero no lograba imaginar cómo continuarían sus relaciones con mamá Hentjen, y por eso le gustó que al día siguiente Teltscher lo acompañara a la taberna; de este modo su reencuentro con mamá Hentjen resultaría más leve y sobre todo más sencillo.

Teltscher había tramado algo nuevo: había que contratar a una negra; esto daría un atractivo especial a las últimas funciones; quería llamarla «Estrella Negra de África», y la luchadora alemana, tras un par de asaltos indecisos, tendría que vencerla. Esch temía que Teltscher expusiera sus proyectos africanos ante mamá Hentjen, y no se equivocó, pues en cuanto entraron Teltscher habló de su nueva ocurrencia: «Señora Hentjen, nuestro Esch va a conseguirnos una negra». Ella, de momento, no comprendió, ni siquiera cuando Esch, fiel a la verdad, aseguró que no sabía dónde encontrar una negra; no, mamá Hentjen se negaba a escuchar y se escudó en una amarga acritud: «Una más o una menos, para él carece de importancia». Teltscher, muy animado, le dio un golpecito a Esch en la rodilla: «Naturalmente con un hombre como él, a quien le llueven las mujeres, no hay quien pueda competir». Esch lanzó una ojeada al retrato del señor Hentjen: ahí había uno que le había ganado la partida. «Sí, así es Esch», insistió Teltscher. Para la señora Hentjen todo esto fue la confirmación de la mala opinión que tenía de Esch e intentó afianzar su alianza con Teltscher; examinó el pelo

corto y tieso de Esch, aquel oscuro cepillo bajo el que brillaba la piel de la cabeza, amarillenta, y tuvo la impresión de que ella necesitaba hoy un aliado. Dejó de lado a Esch y alabó a Teltscher; desde luego era muy comprensible que un hombre con sentido de la dignidad no quisiera saber nada de aquellas historias de mujeres y lo dejara todo en manos de Esch. Esch, herido, dijo que muchos se pelearían para poder hacer este trabajo, y que no todo el mundo era capaz de hacerlo. Y despreció a Teltscher, que ni siquiera había sabido conservar a Ilona. Pero ¡ya se vería!, muy pronto no habría nadie que pudiera tener a Ilona. «Bueno, señor Esch», exclamó la señora Hentjen, «¿a qué espera? La negra está aguardando; póngase inmediatamente a trabajar.» Sí, eso era exactamente lo que iba a hacer, replicó él, y, en cuanto hubo terminado de comer, se levantó y dejó a la un tanto desconcertada señora Hentjen en compañía de Teltscher.

Estuvo vagando por ahí un buen rato. No tenía nada que hacer. Le molestaba haberla dejado sola con Teltscher y finalmente, obedeciendo a su impulso, regresó. No era de suponer que encontrara todavía allí a Teltscher, pero quería cerciorarse. La taberna estaba vacía y tampoco encontró a nadie en la cocina. O sea que Teltscher se había ido y también él hubiera podido marcharse, pero sabía que a esta hora la señora Hentjen solía estar en su habitación y ahora se dio cuenta de que, en realidad, él había vuelto por esto. Dudó un momento y luego subió por la escalera de madera procurando no hacer ruido. Sin llamar a la puerta, entró. La señora Hentjen estaba sentada junto a la ventana y zurcía medias; cuando le vio, emitió un ligero grito y se puso rígida. Él avanzó decidido hacia ella, la apretó contra el respaldo de la silla y la besó en la boca. Ella movió la pesada cabeza a un lado y a otro, en un intento de resistencia, y dijo con voz ronca: «Váyase, aquí no se le ha perdido a usted nada». Mucho más penoso que su violencia le resultaba el pensamiento de que él, saliendo de los brazos de una checa o una negra, estuviera aquí en su habitación, una habitación que nunca había sido hollada por un hombre. Ella luchaba por su habitación. Pero él la retuvo con firmeza, y ella al fin le devolvió los besos con labios secos y abultados, tal vez para incitarle a irse valiéndose de la mansedumbre, pues entre beso y beso iba repitiendo con los dientes apretados: «Aquí no se le ha perdido a usted nada». Por último suplicó: «Aquí no». Esch, cansado de aquella lucha desagradable, recordó que tenía entre sus brazos a una mujer que merecía respeto y consideración. Si ella quería variar el lugar de la función, ¿por qué no complacerla? La soltó y ella lo empujó hacia la puerta. Cuando salieron al pasillo, él dijo con voz ronca: «¿Dónde?». Ella no le comprendió, porque había creído que él, por fin, iba a marcharse. Esch, cerca de su cara, preguntó de nuevo: «¿Dónde?», y como ella permaneció inmóvil y sin pronunciar palabra, la abrazó otra vez, para volver a llevarla a la habitación. Ella sentía como única misión la defensa de aquel cuarto. Miró indefensa a su alrededor, vio la puerta de la alcoba principal, concibió de repente la esperanza de que la elegancia de aquella estancia le haría recobrar el sentido común y las buenas costumbres y señaló hacia allí con la mirada; él la hizo pasar delante, pero la siguió, poniéndole la mano sobre el hombro, como si condujera un prisionero.

En cuanto entraron en la estancia, ella dijo con tono inseguro: «Bueno, confío en que ahora será usted razonable, señor Esch», y quiso acercarse a la ventana para abrir los postigos, pero él la había cogido por detrás y mamá Hentjen no pudo moverse. Intentó desasirse, dieron unos traspiés y fueron a parar sobre las nueces, con lo cual estuvieron a punto de caerse los dos. Las nueces se rompieron bajo sus pies y cuando la señora Hentjen, a fin de salvar sus provisiones, retrocedió hacia la alcoba, pensando que allí recobraría el equilibrio y tendría los pies firmes sobre el suelo, tuvo un instante de reflexión sonámbula: ¿no había sido ella misma la que le había atraído hasta aquí? Pero esta idea no hizo sino acrecentar su amargura y silbó con rabia: «Váyase con su negra… a mí no podrá usted obtenerme como a sus demás mujeres». Buscó refugio en una esquina de la alcoba y aferró la cortina; las anillas de madera que sostenían las cortinas sonaron levemente y por miedo a estropear el hermoso cortinaje ella se soltó, y no pudo evitar ser empujada hacia el oscuro nicho donde se hallaban las camas matrimoniales. Siempre de pie detrás de ella, Esch le cogió ahora las manos, libres ya, y tiró de ellas hacia atrás y hacia sí, con lo que ella tuvo que notar la excitación de su sexo. Fuera por esto, fuera porque la visión de las camas la había sumergido en un estupor indefenso, ella cedió a la imperiosidad jadeante de Esch. Y como él tiraba torpemente de sus ropas y fuera ahora su ropa interior la que estuviera en peligro, ella le ayudó, como un reo que colabora con su verdugo, y él casi experimentó horror al ver cuán fácil y simplemente se desarrollaba todo, y cómo mamá Hentjen, en cuanto cayó sobre la cama, se acostó tranquilamente de espaldas. Y todavía le llenó de más profundo horror el que ella inmóvil y dura, como obedeciendo las reglas de una antigua obligación, como reemprendiendo una vieja y acostumbrada exigencia, se dejara hacer sin decir una palabra, sin un estremecimiento. Solo su redonda cabeza oscilaba sobre la almohada de un lado a otro como en una obstinada negación. Al sentir Esch el calor del cuerpo abierto de ella, él acrecentó su placer para despertarlo en ella y vencerlo. Tomó su cabeza entre las manos y la apretó como si quisiera extraer de ella los pensamientos que ocultaba y que no le pertenecían, y recorrió con sus labios la fea y grasienta superficie de sus gordas mejillas, así como su hundida frente, pero la piel de ella permaneció sorda e inmóvil, tan inmóvil y sorda como la muchedumbre por la que Martin se había sacrificado sin lograr redimirla. Tal vez Ilona sentía también de este modo la gorda pesadez de Korn, y por un instante experimentó una sensación de felicidad al pensar que actuaba como ella, y pensó también que era justo que todo sucediera así, por ella y por la redención que había de conducir a la justicia. Oh, extinguirse,

convertirse para siempre en un huérfano, aniquilarse uno mismo con toda la injusticia que se soporta y que se ha acumulado, pero aniquilar también a la mujer cuyos labios se busca, aniquilar el tiempo, tiempo que fue también de ella, tiempo depositado en estas mejillas ajadas, anhelo de exterminar a la mujer que había vivido en el tiempo para hacerla resucitar renovada e intemporal, entregada y dominada en esta íntima unión. Ahora la boca de ella se había unido a la suya, como el hocico de un animal apretado contra un cristal, y Esch se enfureció, porque ella, para evitar que él se la arrebatase, retenía el alma prisionera tras los dientes apretados. Y cuando ella, con un ronco gruñido, abrió finalmente los labios, Esch sintió una felicidad que jamás le había hecho sentir ninguna otra mujer, y fluyó sin fin en ella, anhelando poseer a aquella mujer que había dejado de ser ella misma para convertirse en una vida recibida de nuevo, maternal, arrancada del seno del misterio, aniquiladora del yo, que había roto sus fronteras, sumergida y anegada dentro de su propia libertad. Porque el hombre que quiere el bien y la justicia quiere lo absoluto, y Esch comprendió por primera vez en su vida que esto no depende del placer, sino de una unión que está por encima de cualquier motivación casual, triste o incluso mezquina, y que radica en un extinguirse en común, que, fuera del tiempo, anula el tiempo; comprendió que el renacer del ser humano es algo tan sereno como el todo, el cual, sin embargo, es capaz de empequeñecerse y ceñirse al hombre, cuando lo exige la voluntad en éxtasis, a fin de que sea para él lo que únicamente a él le corresponde: la redención.

¡Qué significaba ya ser el amante de mamá Hentjen! Muchos hombres opinan que el punto culminante de la vida se encuentra en la existencia de una mujer determinada. Esch había sabido liberarse hacía mucho tiempo de tales prejuicios. No, por más que de vez en cuando la señora Hentjen se antepusiera a todo en su mente. Eso no. Él tenía en su vida otras miras más elevadas y más grandes.

Se detuvo frente a una librería cerca del Mercado Nuevo. Se fijó en una reproducción de la estatua de la libertad, estampada en oro sobre tela verde; debajo se leía «América hoy y mañana». No había comprado muchos libros durante su vida y a él mismo le sorprendió verse ahora entrando en una librería, que, con sus mostradores lisos y brillantes, con sus libros de formas regulares colocados en perfecto orden, recordaba lejanamente una tienda de tabaco. Le habría gustado quedarse un rato charlando con alguien, pero, como nadie le prestó atención, pagó el libro y se encontró con un paquete en las manos sin saber qué hacer con él. ¿Un regalo para la señora Hentjen? Seguro que no le interesaría lo más mínimo, pero, no obstante, había algo que de modo inexplicable la relacionaba con esta compra. Lleno de dudas, se detuvo de nuevo frente al escaparate. Detrás del cristal, colgados de un cordón, pendían los libritos para aprender idiomas, de diferentes colores y con las banderas de la nación correspondiente en cada lomo, como una alegre incitación a quien deseara aprender. Esch se dirigió a la taberna para almorzar.

Cuando una persona lleva debajo del brazo un regalo inadecuado, le entra temor de mostrarse, y Esch llevó su libro junto a la ventana; en este sitio solía él sentarse para leer el periódico después de comer, ¿por qué no podía hacer lo mismo con el libro? Poco después mamá Hentjen le gritó a través del local vacío: «Bueno, señor Esch, parece que tiene usted tiempo hasta para leer libros en pleno día». «Sí», respondió él animándose, «se lo voy a enseñar.» Se levantó y llevó el libro al mostrador. «¿Qué se hace con eso?», preguntó ella, cuando le tendió el libro; él le indicó con un gesto que le echara un vistazo; ella lo hojeó un poco, miró algunas ilustraciones con algo más de atención y se lo devolvió diciendo simplemente: «Está bien». Esch sufrió una decepción, aunque ya había imaginado que a ella no le interesaría el libro, ¡qué sabía una mujer así de grandes y elevados proyectos! A pesar de todo, siguió allí de pie esperando que ocurriera algo…, pero lo único que ocurrió fue que mamá Hentjen dijo: «Usted piensa seguramente pasarse toda la tarde sentado allí con ese chisme». Esch contestó: «Yo no pienso nada», y, sintiéndose ofendido, llevó el libro a su casa para leerlo a solas. Y se propuso emigrar solo. Completamente solo. Y sin embargo no podía dejar de pensar, una y otra vez, que estaba estudiando la obra americana no solo para sí mismo sino también para mamá Hentjen.

Cada día leía un poco. Al principio se limitó a contemplar las ilustraciones, y ahora, cuando pensaba en América, tenía la impresión de que allí los árboles ya no eran verdes, ni las praderas multicolores, ni el cielo azul, sino que allí la vida se desarrollaba bajo las mismas sombras rutilantes y matizadas que reflejaban las fotografías en tonos grises amarronados o los dibujos a pluma finamente esgrafiados. Luego se concentró en el texto. Los infinitos números de las estadísticas le aburrían, pero era demasiado concienzudo para saltárselos y logró retener muchos en la memoria. Despertaron en él gran interés las organizaciones policial y judicial americana, las cuales, según afirmaba el libro, estaban puestas al servicio de la libertad democrática, de modo que, para cualquiera que supiera leer un libro, estaba muy claro que allá no se solía meter en la cárcel a un inválido al conjuro de navieros depravados; Martin, por tanto, debía irse con él. Esch daba vuelta a la página y, cosa sumamente extraña, en la fotografía que mostraba al gigante del océano anclado en el puerto de Nueva York se veía a mamá Hentjen apoyada en la borda, vestida con su traje de seda marrón, la frágil sombrilla de color rosa entre las manos y mirando hacia el torbellino de los que se acercaban, mientras que Martin estaba sentado con sus muletas sobre un cajón, y alrededor se oía hablar inglés por todas partes.

Y como Esch era muy concienzudo, decidió, tras algunas vacilaciones, volver a aquella librería cuya

distribución lo había cautivado. Sin tener en cuenta el gasto, adquirió el manual de inglés que ostentaba la alegre y atrayente bandera de la Unión y se dispuso de inmediato a aprender los vocablos ingleses, y detrás de cada palabra estaba la palabra «Libertad», en los tonos suavemente grises, y elegantes de la fotografía satinada, como si con esta palabra debiera relegarse al olvido y hacerse desaparecer todo cuanto hubiera existido o se hubiera expresado en el antiguo idioma. Decidió que incluso entre ellos hablarían inglés, y que para ello había que enseñarle inglés a mamá Hentjen. Pero con su sano desprecio por lo quimérico, no permitió que todo quedara en deseos vacíos: sus ganancias aumentaban y, pese a que en los últimos días había disminuido mucho la afluencia de público, le quedaban todavía doscientos marcos de beneficio procedentes de este negocio y los destinó desde ahora a fondo básico para los gastos del viaje; con esto se podía negociar, se podía ayudar a alguien a escapar de la cárcel, se podía empezar una vida nueva. Actualmente sus pasos le llevaban con frecuencia a la catedral. Cuando desde la escalinata contemplaba la plaza y aparecían algunas personas hablando inglés, sentía un aire de libertad que le acariciaba la frente, y se quitaba el sombrero bajo el suave viento del verano. Incluso las calles de Colonia empezaron a adquirir otro aspecto, un aspecto que casi podría calificarse de inocente, y Esch las contemplaba con benevolencia y con cierta alegría maliciosa. Bastaba con estar allá, al otro lado del charco, para que aquí todo cambiase. Y si uno regresaba alguna vez, podría visitar la catedral acompañado de un guía que hablase inglés.

Después del espectáculo, esperó a Teltscher; anduvieron en la noche envueltos en un aire delicioso y húmedo. Esch se detuvo: «Bien, Teltscher, usted está siempre presumiendo de sus contratos en América: ha llegado la hora de hablar en serio de esto». A Teltscher le encantaba hablar del destino:

—Sí, allí me darán todos los contratos que quiera, basta con que yo quiera.

Esch le interrumpió para oponerse:

—Bueno, ya… con lo de tirar cuchillos… Pero ¿no cree usted que se podría hacer también allí un espectáculo de lucha o algo parecido?

Teltscher rió despectivamente:

—¿Acaso pretende usted irse allá con nuestras mujeres?

—¿Y por qué no?, en definitiva.

—Está usted chiflado, Esch. ¿Con ese material quiere irse? Si al menos… Pero no, allá quieren deporte de veras, y lo que hacen nuestras mujeres… —volvió a reír.

—Tal vez podría conseguirse —insistió Esch.

—¡Es una locura! Como si allí nos esperasen precisamente a nosotros… Y además, ¿dónde conseguiría encontrar usted aquí a gente entrenada? —Teltscher reflexionaba—: Si al menos estas vacas tuvieran apariencia de tales, podríamos quizá hacer algo. Claro que únicamente en México o en América del Sur.

Esch no comprendía y a Teltscher le irritó su desconcierto.

—Bah, con la necesidad de carne que allí tienen… Si las luchas no dieran resultado, tendríamos al menos el establo preparado para las vacas, y los gastos del viaje más algunas comisiones en el bolsillo.

Esto estaba más claro. Y la imagen fotográfica de color marrón o gris que Esch tenía en la mente se convirtió en una imagen sureña de colores vivos y fantásticos. Sí, era convincente. Teltscher dijo:

—Usted ha cumplido hasta ahora su tarea a la perfección, Esch. Pues a ver si consigue reedificar nuestro circo con mujeres que tengan apariencia. Conozco a un par de personas que nos arreglarían allá este asunto. Y luego nos vamos con el cargamento.

Esch sabía que todo esto olía diabólicamente a trata de blancas. Pero él no tenía por qué enterarse; las luchas eran un negocio legal y, si acaso adquirían un aire sospechoso, no importaba demasiado: con ello quedaría un poco equilibrada la cuenta pendiente con una policía que metía en la cárcel a los inocentes. Una policía que está al servicio de la libertad y que no acepta dinero de los armadores no va a estar a la espera de este tipo de modificaciones. Ciertamente la trata de blancas no era un negocio elegante, pero en definitiva también mamá Hentjen regenta su taberna sin ninguna convicción. Tampoco a Lohberg le gusta su tienda. Y siempre es mejor llevarse a Teltscher a América con el circo que dejarle aquí lanzando cuchillos. Pasaron junto a un policía que hacía su ronda de vigilancia nocturna con aire aburrido, y a Esch le hubiera gustado asegurarle que, a pesar de todo, la policía no podría tener queja: ¡todavía les entregaría a Nentwig!; un Esch mantiene el orden y cumple con su obligación, aunque su socio sea un cerdo. «Cerraos policías» refunfuñó. El asfalto mojado brillaba como el papel de las fotografías, gris a la luz de las luces amarillas, y Esch vio ante sí la estatua de la libertad, cuya antorcha quema y redime cuanto ha quedado en el pasado, todo lo que ha sido, todo lo muerto que se echa al fuego; y si esto es asesinato, es un asesinato sobre el cual la policía no tiene ningún poder; cometido en pro de la redención. Había tomado una decisión y, cuando Teltscher al despedirse le gritó «Y no lo olvide: allí las quieren rubias, siempre rubias», Esch supo perfectamente que buscaría y traería chicas rubias. Pondría en claro sus antiguas cuentas y luego partiría con su rubio cargamento. Desde la elevada cubierta del gigante del océano contemplarían el enjambre de pequeñas embarcaciones abajo. Se despedirían del viejo mundo con un adiós para siempre. Tal vez las muchachas rubias entonarían en el barco canciones de despedida, cantarían a coro, y cuando el barco, arrastrado por los tensos cables, se deslizara a lo largo de las orillas, tal vez entonces Ilona, rubia ella también, pasearía por la costa y saludaría con la mano,

una Ilona libre ya de todo peligro, y la superficie del agua sería cada vez más amplia.

En realidad tenía que reconocer que su amante era una compañera de su misma condición: una vez consumido el amor, ella no quería saber nada más. En esto mamá Hentjen se parecía a él, aunque a ella la impulsaban otras razones. Para mamá Hentjen el amor era algo tan profundamente secreto que apenas se atrevía a pronunciar la palabra. Una y otra vez olvidaba la existencia del amante, que ahora tenía finalmente y al que no podía impedir que se deslizara hasta su cuarto a la hora de la siesta o después de que se hubieran ido los últimos clientes, y su proximidad provocaba siempre en ella un helado estupor que no empezaba a desaparecer hasta que penetraban en el cuarto a media luz y en la alcoba: entonces esta sensación se convertía en un sentimiento de soledad irresponsable, y la oscura alcoba donde estaba acostada viendo el techo empezaba a oscilar y pronto dejaba de parecer una parte de la casa familiar para semejar un vehículo que colgaba libremente en el espacio de algún lugar de las tinieblas y del infinito. Solo entonces comprendía que había alguien allí, alguien que se tumbaba a su lado y se ocupaba de ella, pero no era Esch, ni siquiera nadie que ella conociera, era un ser que se había introducido extraña y brutalmente en su soledad, un ser a quien, no obstante, era imposible reprocharle su brutalidad, puesto que este ser formaba parte de la soledad, y no se le podía encontrar más que en esta soledad, un ser silencioso, amenazador y jadeante, que exigía que se mitigara su brutalidad: por eso había que jugar con él los juegos que él quisiera, y aunque fuera un juego algo forzado, resultaba extrañamente permitido, porque la soledad lo rodeaba e incluso Dios cerraba los ojos. Pero el hombre con quien compartía el lecho intuía apenas esta soledad, y ella intentó por todos los medios que él no destrozara la soledad. A él le rodea un profundo mutismo y ella no permite que se rompa este mutismo, aunque él pueda tomar este torpe silencio como estupidez o insensibilidad. En el mutismo se esfuma el pudor, pues solo la palabra ha creado la vergüenza. La sensación de ella no es de placer, sino de liberación de la vergüenza: hay tanta soledad en torno a ella que, como si estuviera sola para toda la eternidad, ya no se avergüenza de ninguna parte de su cuerpo. Él no comprende su silencio y está anonadado por ese callar impúdico, que se ofrece y lo incita en una inmovilidad animal. Ella apenas le entrega ni un suspiro, y todo él es una torturada espera y esperanza de que al fin su voz estalle en un grito libre y ronco de placer. Con frecuencia, con mucha frecuencia, él espera en vano, y entonces odia el gesto tranquilizador con que ella le invita a dormirse contra su hombro inmóvil y carnoso. Pero cada vez ella rechaza de pronto con violencia lejos de sí al amante, como si quisiera hacerle desaparecer de repente, a él y a su complicidad: ella le empuja hacia la puerta y, mientras él desciende la escalera, siente sobre su espalda la animadversión de ella. Intuye entonces que acaba de estar en el más forastero de los países y, con todo, saber esto es precisamente lo que le hace volver a ella una y otra vez, torturado y con más deseo que antes. Pues hundirse en la dicha, entregarse mudo y en silencio al impudor del sexo, despierta un anhelo invencible de obligar a la mujer a que le reconozca, de hacer que se inflame en ella el instante presente como una antorcha y extinga todo lo demás, que en el incendio alumbrador ella le entregue su intimidad y que en el silencio de la noche, que todo lo abarca, surja la voz ronca de ella diciéndole a él, el único entre todos, la palabra *tú*, como la diría a un hijo. Él ya no sabe qué aspecto tiene ella, está más allá de la hermosura y de la fealdad, de la juventud y de la vejez; constituye para él únicamente la misión silenciosa de redimirla conquistándola.

Aunque él no podía desear otra cosa en muchos sentidos, e incluso tenía que reconocer que en cierto modo aquel hechizo en que se encontraba era un amor magistral, un amor que superaba las normas vulgares, sin embargo Esch se sentía cada vez humillado cuando, al entrar en el local, mamá Hentjen, por temor a que los demás clientes notaran algo, le hacía tan poco caso que precisamente llamaba la atención y el resultado era contraproducente. Si él no hubiera querido evitar mayores conjeturas y murmuraciones, o no hubieran estado en juego los abundantes y baratos almuerzos, se habría abstenido de acudir a la taberna. Por eso se esforzaba en ser condescendiente y en hallar un justo término medio respecto a su presencia en el local; pero no lo conseguía; no acertaba a complacer a mamá Hentjen. Si aparecía, ella ponía mala cara y a todas luces deseaba que se marchara; si no aparecía, ella le preguntaba después venenosa y sibilante si se había escondido en casa de su negra.

Teltscher era de la opinión de que, por simple sentido de la decencia, tenían que ofrecerle a Gernerth la posibilidad de participar en el proyecto sudamericano. Con ello, a los ojos de Esch, el proyecto adquiría solidez. Pero Gernerth rehusó, aludiendo a su familia, que en otoño, en cuanto dispusiera de alojamiento, quería traerse consigo. O sea que solo quedaba como socio aquel cabeza vacía de Teltscher. Con él, desde luego, no se podían esperar grandes cosas, pero tampoco era cuestión de aplazar el asunto; Esch se puso inmediatamente a la tarea de re-clutamiento y empezó a buscar luchadoras aptas para ser exportadas. Tal vez en semejante ocasión se podría contratar realmente a la negra de que habían hablado; ello constituiría, naturalmente, una diversión extra.

Visitó de nuevo los burdeles y las tabernas, y si a veces sentía un ligero remordimiento, se debía

únicamente a que, caso de enterarse la señora Hentjen, no admitiría jamás que él se dedicaba a semejantes tareas por razones comerciales. Como prueba, por así decirlo, de su indiferencia erótica, y en cierto modo como una coartada moral, aunque insensata, llevó sus pesquisas comerciales hasta los locales del amor homosexual, locales que hasta entonces había rehuido temerosamente. No obstante, tenía la sensación de que quizá le llevaba a estos locales otro motivo. Cuanto allí sucedía debía en pura lógica haberle dejado indiferente, y en cambio era curioso el horror que experimentaba al ver bailar juntos a dos hombres mejilla con mejilla. No podía evitar recordar siempre la primera vez que estuvo en uno de esos antros inmundos, y cómo él, un muchacho a quien habían echado a rodar por el mundo sin que apenas hubiera conocido a su madre, sintió terribles deseos de huir y refugiarse junto a ella cuando vio por vez primera a un invertido, vestido con traje largo de seda y corpiño, que cantaba con voz de falsete canciones obscenas. Cuando ahora volvía a ver semejante porquería y se tragaba las náuseas que le provocaba la visión de estos homosexuales, pensaba que mamá Hentjen, aquella zorra, podría realmente comprender cuán poca diversión le proporcionaban sus gestiones comerciales. Dios sabía que él hubiera preferido mil veces refugiarse junto a ella, antes de andar por ahí teniendo que buscar algo parecido a la inocencia perdida. Era totalmente ridículo imaginar que uno pudiera encontrar en esa sociedad al presidente de una compañía naviera, teniendo en cuenta que tales maricones no son en manera alguna mercancía apta para todo un presidente. De todos modos, en esta cofradía uno tiene que estar preparado para cualquier sorpresa. Y como el ser humano en situaciones atrevidas tiene necesidad de un absoluto dominio de sí mismo, Esch se guardaba mucho de romperles el hocico pintarrajeado a aquellos hombrecillos cuando le dirigían la palabra; por el contrario, se mostraba amable, les ofrecía licores dulces, preguntaba cómo les iba todo y —caso de hacerle ellos confidencias— se interesaba por sus fuentes de ingresos y por los padrinos que pagaban. Ciertamente a menudo se sorprendía de encontrarse escuchando aquellas absurdas charlas, pero acechaba el momento en que surgía el nombre del presidente Bertrand. Entonces la imagen que tenía de aquel hombre elegante, de contornos finamente dibujados, imagen casi inasequible y sobrenatural, adquiría lentamente matices de color, una tonalidad curiosamente suave y se empequeñecía ligeramente al hacerse más intensa y más concreta: aquel hombre recorría el Rin en un yate con motor, y tenía los marineros más hermosos; todo era blanco y celeste en aquel barco de ensueño; en cierta ocasión llegó a Colonia y el pequeño Harry tuvo la suerte de poder echarse en sus brazos; navegaron hasta Amberes en el yate encantado y en Ostende vivieron como dioses; mas por lo general no presta atención a gente como nosotros; su castillo se yergue en un enorme parque cerca de Badenweiler; en sus praderas pacen los ciervos y las flores más exóticas exhalan su perfume; allí reside él, cuando no se encuentra en un país lejano; no recibe a nadie y sus amigos son ingleses o indios indescriptiblemente ricos; posee un automóvil tan grande que puede usarlo para dormir durante la noche. Es más rico que el káiser.

Poco faltó para que Esch olvidara sus gestiones, tanto le obsesionaba el deseo de encontrar a Harry Köhler; y cuando lo consiguió, el corazón le latió apresuradamente y se comportó con él con absoluto respeto, como si no supiera que el chico no era más que un degenerado. Olvidó su odio, olvidó que Martin tenía que sufrir penalidades para que aquellos muchachitos pudieran darse buena vida; sí, casi se sintió celoso por no poder ofrecer al muchacho algo semejante a aquello a lo que sus finas y ricas relaciones le tenían acostumbrado; únicamente tenía una entrada para las luchas e invitó con toda amabilidad al señor Harry. Pero este no se dejó impresionar, con cara de asco e indiferencia se limitó a decir: «Puah», y Esch se sintió avergonzado por haber propuesto algo fuera de tono, pero como al propio tiempo se sintió molesto dijo rudamente: «Claro, yo no puedo invitarle a usted a mi yate». «¿Qué se figura usted?», fue el comentario del otro, dicho en un tono de desconfianza, pero con dulzura. Alfons, el músico gordo y rubio que estaba sentado a la mesa, sin chaqueta y con una camisa floreada de seda, mostrando unas redondeces que daban la impresión de ser pechos de mujer, rió enseñando sus blancos dientes: «Se figura la verdad, Harry». Harry puso cara contrita: «Confío en que su intención, señor mío, no sea la de ofender». «Ni mucho menos», manifestó Esch, batiéndose en retirada; únicamente se había lamentado porque sabía que el señor estaba acostumbrado a cosas más finas. Harry, con una débil sonrisa de resignación, hizo un gesto con la mano: «Está olvidado». Alfons le acarició el brazo: «No te atormentes, pequeño, ¡hay tantos que quisieran consolarte!». Harry movió la cabeza en un ademán de dulce melancolía: «Solo se ama una vez en la vida». Este habla como Lolhberg, pensó Esch, y dijo: «Es verdad». Pues aunque el idiota de Mannheim pocas veces tenía razón, en este caso sí podía estar en lo cierto, y Esch repitió: «Sí, es verdad». Harry, ostensiblemente satisfecho de hallar aprobación, miró agradecido a Esch, pero Alfons, que no quería oír aquello, se ofendió: «¿Y la amistad que se te brinda, Harry, no significa nada para ti?». Harry movió la cabeza: «¿Qué es esa pobre intimidad que vosotros llamáis amistad? ¡Como si el amor tuviera algo que ver con vuestra amistad y con esa intimidad!». «Vaya, pequeño, tú tienes una visión muy personal del amor», dijo Alfons con ternura. Harry, como bajo el influjo de un recuerdo, añadió: «El amor es una gran extrañeza». Esch no pudo evitar acordarse del silencio de la señora Hentjen, mientras Alfons decía: «Para un pobre músico esto es demasiado elevado, pequeño mío». La orquesta hacía mucho ruido y Harry, que se había inclinado sobre la mesa para no tener que hablar a gritos, dijo en voz baja y confidencial: «El amor es una gran extrañeza: lo forman dos seres y cada uno se halla en un astro distinto y ninguno de los dos puede saber

nunca nada del otro. Y de pronto ya no hay distancia ni tampoco existe el tiempo y los dos se han fundido el uno en el otro, de modo que ya no saben nada ni de sí mismos ni del otro. Esto es el amor». Esch pensó en Badenweiler: un amor oculto en un oculto castillo; algo destinado, desde luego, a Ilona. Pero mientras reflexionaba sobre ello, sintió un dolor lacerante: nunca lograría averiguar si el señor y la señora Hentjen se habían amado y encontrado el uno al otro dentro de esta elevada modalidad del amor o en otra distinta. Harry prosiguió y era como si estuviera recitando un pasaje bíblico: «Solo en la más terrible sublimación de la extrañeza, cuando esta es llevada, por así decirlo, al infinito, puede florecer lo que puede considerarse como la meta inaccesible del amor y que, de suyo, lo constituye: el misterio de la unidad… Sí, eso es». «¡Salud!», dijo Alfons en tono triste, pero a Esch le pareció como si el muchacho hubiera recibido sabiduría de lo alto, y concibió la esperanza de que esta sabiduría que albergaba el muchacho contuviera también la respuesta a sus propias preguntas. Y, aunque sus ideas no coincidían con las de Harry, dijo lo que ya en una ocasión había dicho a Lohberg: «Pero entonces nadie tiene derecho a sobrevivir», y al decirlo tenía la seguridad, en parte satisfactoria y en parte amarga, de que la viuda Hentjen, precisamente por estar todavía viva, no podía haber amado a su marido. Alfons le susurró a Esch: «¡Por todos los santos del cielo!, no diga usted tales cosas delante del pequeño», pero ya no sirvió para nada; Harry le miraba horrorizado, y con voz opaca, algo más oscura de lo normal, dijo: «De todos modos, yo no vivo ya». Alfons le tendió el vaso lleno hasta arriba de licor: «Pobre muchacho, desde aquella historia siempre dice cosas así… Lo echó a perder completamente». Esch se sintió devuelto bruscamente a la realidad; fingió no saber nada: «¿Quién?». Alfons se encogió de hombros: «Pues quién va a ser, el gran dios, el ángel blanco…». «¡Calla la boca o te arranco los ojos!», rugió Harry. Esch, a quien el muchacho inspiraba lástima, dijo autoritariamente a Alfons: «¡Déjale en paz!». Harry se echó de pronto a llorar histéricamente: «Yo no vivo ya, yo no vivo ya…». Esch no sabía qué hacer, puesto que no podía emplear los mismos recursos que solía usar con las chicas que lloraban. O sea que aquel hombre había destruido también la vida de este chico; quería hacer algo por Harry y por eso dijo: «Mataremos a tiros a ese Bertrand». Harry dio un grito: «¡No harás eso!». «¿Por qué no? Debería alegrarte, bien merecido lo tiene.» «Tú, tú no harás eso…», el pequeño chillaba con los ojos desorbitados, «… tú no puedes tocarlo siquiera…» A Esch le molestó que el muchacho fuera tan tonto y que no se diera cuenta de su buena intención. «Un cerdo de tal calaña merece ser degollado», insistió. «No es un cerdo», dijo Harry en tono suplicante, «es lo más noble, lo más sublime, lo más hermoso que existe sobre la tierra.» En cierto sentido, el muchacho tenía razón: uno no podía hacerle nada a aquel hombre. Esch estuvo a punto de prometérselo. «No tiene cura», dijo Alfons melancólico apurando su licor. Harry, con el rostro entre los puños, empezó a reír balanceándose como una pagoda: «Él y un cerdo, él y un cerdo»; después su risa se transformó de nuevo en sollozos. Cuando Alfons quiso atraerlo sobre su gordo pecho cubierto de seda, Esch tuvo que intervenir para evitar un escándalo. Ordenó a Alfons que se largara con viento fresco, y dijo a Harry: «Nos vamos. ¿Dónde vives?». El muchacho, convertido ahora en un ser carente de voluntad, le dio obediente la dirección. Ya en la calle, Esch le cogió del brazo, como lo hubiera hecho con una mujer, y, ofreciendo protección uno y recibiéndola otro, ambos se sintieron felices. El viento soplaba suavemente procedente del Rin. Frente a la puerta de su casa, Harry se estrechó contra Esch y dio la impresión de que iba a ofrecer su rostro al hombre para que lo besara. Esch le empujó hacia dentro. Pero Harry salió de nuevo y le susurró: «Tú no le harás nada», y antes de que Esch tuviera tiempo de reaccionar, el muchacho le abrazó, le besó torpemente la manga y desapareció dentro de la casa.

La afluencia de público a las luchas disminuía notablemente y era necesario activar la propaganda. Sin consultar a los otros, Esch decidió pedir que apareciera un comentario del espectáculo en el *Volkswacht*. Pero cuando se encontró ante la sucia puerta blanca de la redacción, descubrió claramente que le había traído hasta aquí otro motivo distinto. De suyo, esta visita era inútil y tonta: todo el asunto de los combates femeninos le importaba ya muy poco, pues ni siquiera servía de nada a Ilona, también para Ilona debía ocurrir algo más importante, más definitivo, y comprendía también que *Volkswacht* no publicaría ninguna reseña, si hasta ahora no lo había hecho debido a algún prejuicio proletario. En el fondo, la actitud del periódico socialista era loable; por lo menos allí existía una derecha y una izquierda, existía una separación nítida entre la visión burguesa del mundo y la proletaria. En realidad habría que hacerle ver a mamá Hentjen que tal fuerza de carácter existía de verdad: entonces ella dejaría de despreciar a estas gentes que eran socialistas convencidos pero condenaban como ella los combates, y tendría que dejar de mirar por encima del hombro al socialista Martin. Esch, al pensar en Martin, se desconcertó; ¡solo el diablo podía saber qué buscaba hoy él, August Esch, en esta redacción!; era evidente que no era nada relacionado con los combates. Al entrar todavía daba vueltas en su mente a estos pensamientos, y hasta que el redactor, de forma sumamente molesta, demostró no acordarse de él y Esch tuvo que refrescarle la pésima memoria aludiendo al asunto de la huelga, no se dio perfecta cuenta de que el motivo de su visita era Martin. Esch estalló:

—Tengo una noticia muy importante para usted.

—¡Ah, la huelga! —y el redactor quiso restar importancia al asunto con un gesto displicente—. Hace ya

mucho de eso.

—Desde luego —repuso Esch irritado—, pero Geyring sigue en la cárcel.

—Bien, ¿y qué? Le salieron tres meses.

—Pero es necesario hacer algo —se oyó Esch decir a sí mismo en un tono de voz mucho más alto del que tenía intención de usar.

—Bueno, a mí no me grite. No fui yo quien le metió en la cárcel.

Esch no era hombre que cediera fácilmente:

—Hay que hacer algo —repitió impaciente y testarudo—. Conozco a los muchachos con los que trata nuestro inmaculado Bertrand… ¡Están en Colonia, no en Italia! —concluyó con tono de triunfo.

—Los conocemos desde hace muchos años, querido amigo y camarada. ¿Es esta la novedad que quiere anunciarnos?

Esch comprendió que perdía terreno:

—Entonces, ¿por qué no actúan ustedes? Martin se sacrificó.

—Querido camarada —dijo el otro—, me parece que tiene usted unas ideas algo infantiles. Por otra parte debería usted saber que vivimos en un estado de derecho.

Esperaba que ahora Esch se marcharía, pero Esch no se movió, y los dos hombres estuvieron sentados un rato el uno frente al otro, sin saber qué hacer ni qué decirse, sin comprenderse, contemplando tan solo su mutua desnudez y fealdad. En las mejillas de Esch aparecieron rojas manchas de indignación y se fueron extendiendo por la piel oscura. El redactor, con su chaqueta de pana marrón y aquella cara un poco llena con un bigote castaño y caído, era, como la pana de su chaqueta, blando y fuerte al mismo tiempo. En esta concordancia había cierta coquetería y Esch recordó la amanerada forma de vestir de los chicos de los locales masculinos. Se sintió agresivo:

—¿O sea que ustedes protegen a ese maricón? Y el otro, entretanto, puede pudrirse en la cárcel —torció la boca con cara de asco y mostró su dentadura de caballo.

El redactor perdió la paciencia:

—Dígame, querido señor, ¿y a usted qué le importa todo esto?

Esch perdió los estribos:

—Ustedes evitan adrede todo aquello que podría salvarle… No publicaron el artículo y protegen al tipo ese, a ese Bertrand que le llevó a la cárcel… ¡Y pretenden pasar por defensores de la libertad! —rió con amargura—. ¡Pues sí que está en buenas manos la libertad!

Evidentemente es un loco, pensó el redactor, y por eso respondió con calma:

—Oiga, periodísticamente no es posible que publiquemos como una noticia lo que usted nos comunica con semanas o meses de retraso: esto…

Esch se levantó de un salto:

—¡Ya tendrán ustedes noticias frescas mías! —gritó, y salió cerrando de un golpe tras sí la sucia puerta blanca, que no encajó bien y se quedó oscilando y dando golpes.

En la calle se detuvo perplejo. ¿Por qué se había comportado así? ¿Acaso podía él evitar que aquellos socialistas fuesen unos cerdos? De nuevo había que reconocer que mamá Hentjen tenía toda la razón al sentir desprecio por aquella chusma. «Prensa vendida», dijo para sí. Y sin embargo había ido allí con las mejores intenciones, había querido brindarles la oportunidad de justificarse ante la señora Hentjen. De nuevo las cosas y los criterios habían empezado a dislocarse y a mezclarse de forma sumamente irritante. Un hecho estaba claro: el redactor se había comportado como un cerdo, en primer lugar porque eso era y en segundo lugar porque pretendía proteger al presidente Bertrand con todos los medios de una prensa vendida, sí, una prensa vendida. Y aquel señor presidente era un auténtico cerdo, por más que el pequeño se negara a admitirlo y por muy intocable que fuera aquel presidente-cerdo. En contrapartida, lo que el pequeño había dicho acerca del amor era muy exacto. ¡Qué confusión! A lo sumo una sola cosa estaba clara: la señora Hentjen no podía haber amado a su marido; la habían obligado a casarse con aquel cerdo. Y como Esch odiaba cada vez más el mundo que le rodeaba, y odiaba a los cerdos, a los que habría que degollar tal y como se merecen los cerdos, odiaba también cada vez más declaradamente al presidente Bertrand, lo odiaba tanto por sus vicios como por su crimen. Intentó imaginárselo sumergido en su opulencia, con un grueso puro en la mano, sentado a la mesa en un sillón tapizado en su castillo, y cuando esta imagen elegante surgió por fin de la niebla del tabaco, fue una imagen parecida a la de un sastre presumido, una imagen muy semejante al retrato del señor Hentjen que colgaba sobre la cornisa de la taberna.

Para la fiesta de cumpleaños de mamá Hentjen, que todos los años era debidamente festejada por los clientes habituales de la taberna, Esch había adquirido una pequeña estatua de la libertad en bronce, y este regalo le parecía muy significativo, no solo porque aludía al futuro en América, sino porque formaría una magnífica pareja con la figura de Schiller con la que había conseguido tanto éxito. Al mediodía se presentó con la estatuilla.

Desgraciadamente fue un fracaso. Si él le hubiera entregado el regalo a solas, ella habría estado con certeza en disposición de poder ver la belleza de la figura; pero el pánico que la invadía ante cualquier

acercamiento en público o cualquier familiaridad, la dejó tan ciega que no demostró ninguna alegría, ni tampoco mostró el más mínimo entusiasmo cuando él, como disculpándose, observó que la estatuilla tal vez quedaría muy bien junto a la reproducción del monumento a Schiller. «Sí, como a usted le parezca…», dijo ella indiferente, y esto fue todo. Naturalmente ella hubiera podido llevarse el regalo a su habitación como adorno; pero para que él no imaginara que todo cuanto traía merecía un sitio de honor y para que comprendiera de una vez por todas que ella quería defender todavía la pureza de su habitación, subió a buscar el monumento a Schiller y lo colocó en la repisa junto a la nueva estatua de la libertad, al lado de la torre Eiffel. Ahora estaban allá juntos el cantor de la libertad, la estatua americana y la torre francesa como símbolo de unas convicciones que la señora Hentjen no compartía, y la estatua levantaba el brazo y alargaba su antorcha en dirección al señor Hentjen. Esch sintió su regalo profanado por la mirada del señor Hentjen y le hubiera gustado exigir que, al menos, se pusiera el retrato un poco más lejos; pero, de todos modos, ¿de qué hubiera servido? El local que el señor Hentjen había marcado con su personalidad seguiría siendo el mismo, y casi prefería que todo continuara en su sitio, clara y honestamente. ¿Para qué pretender mantener en secreto innoblemente algo que era imposible ocultar? Esch descubrió que no le atraía allí solamente la baratura de la comida, que recibía en abundancia bajo la mirada del señor Hentjen, sino que también necesitaba aquel rostro para alguna cosa secreta, como si fuera un condimento especial y amargo de aquella comida: era la misma amargura inevitable con que él se dejaba humillar por el malhumorado comportamiento de mamá Hentjen, y se sintió irremediablemente vencido por ella cuando la mujer le murmuró hoscamente que podía ir a verla aquella noche.

Pasó toda la tarde pensando lúbricamente en los realistas ritos amorosos de mamá Hentjen. Y de nuevo le torturó aquel realismo, que formaba un cruel contraste con las reticencias habituales en ella. ¿En qué noches había adquirido ella tales hábitos? Una esperanza, en la que ni él mismo creía, empezó a nacer en su espíritu: todo esto desaparecería en cuanto estuvieran en América, pero la dulzura de esta esperanza se esfumó ante la excitación que le produjo notar en el bolsillo la llave de la puerta de ella. Sacó la llave, la puso en la palma de la mano y sintió el suave contacto del hierro. Ella se había negado a aprender el idioma inglés, pero el aliento del futuro soplaba de nuevo por las callejas. La llave de la libertad, pensó Esch. La catedral se erguía gris en el atardecer, sus torres se destacaban con su color gris acero, rodeadas por el hálito de lo nuevo y lo inusitado. Esch contó las horas que faltaban para la noche. Más importante que el Alhambra era encontrar muchachas para Sudamérica. Cinco horas, y después abriría la puerta de la casa. Esch se imaginó la alcoba, la vio a ella tendida en la cama: pensar que se deslizaría junto a ella, que ella se estremecería al contacto de su piel y de su ardor, le dejaba sin aliento y con la boca reseca. Porque todavía la semana anterior, y todas las semanas anteriores, ella le había acogido con sorda inmovilidad, y aunque aquel breve y estático estremecimiento fuera casi imperceptible, no obstante la masa de lo habitual se había abierto por algún sitio, por algún sitio insignificante pero virginal, y había sido como una señal de futuro y de esperanza. A Esch le pareció impropio entrar hoy, día del cumpleaños de mamá Hentjen, en locales de prostitutas, y se dirigió al Alhambra.

Cuando más tarde llegó a la taberna, observó ya desde lejos el resplandor amarillo que se proyectaba sobre el pavimento. Los postigos acristalados de las ventanas estaban abiertos, y dentro se veía a la homenajeada, rígida en su traje de seda, rodeada de clientes bullangueros; sobre la mesa había una ponchera. Esch se detuvo en la oscuridad; le repugnaba entrar. Dio media vuelta y se alejó, no para ir en busca de locales nocturnos donde cumplir con su trabajo de reclutamiento, sino para correr furioso por las calles. En el puente sobre el Rin se apoyó en la baranda de hierro, contempló el agua negra y los hangares de la otra orilla. Las rodillas apenas le sostenían, tanto deseaba hacer saltar el rígido corsé dentro del que se ocultaba la mujer; las ballenas estallarían en la salvaje lucha que forzosamente se produciría. Con el rostro vacío de expresión, regresó pesadamente a la ciudad, deslizando la mano por los barrotes de la baranda del puente.

La casa estaba a oscuras. Mamá Hentjen, con una palmatoria en la mano, le esperaba en lo alto de la escalera. Él apagó sencillamente la vela y abrazó a la mujer. Pero ella ya se había quitado el corsé, y no solo no ofreció resistencia, sino que le dio un beso suave. Y aunque este saludo le sorprendió y era tal vez tan extraño como aquel estremecimiento que él aguardaba con impaciencia, el beso, no obstante, le hizo ver con claridad, de modo terrible e indudable, que formaba también parte de sus antiguas costumbres el terminar la celebración del día de su cumpleaños con una noche de amor; y cuando llegó el ansiado momento en que un estremecimiento de felicidad recorrió el cuerpo de la mujer, Esch experimentó un dolor furioso al pensar que la piel del señor Hentjen y su cuerpo, que prefería no imaginarse en semejante postura, habían provocado en ella idéntico estremecimiento: el fantasma que él se figuraba desterrado para siempre aparecía de nuevo, más sarcástico, más invencible que nunca, y para vencerlo, para demostrar también a la mujer que allí solo existía él, se echó con furia sobre ella y le clavó su dentadura caballuna en el hombro carnoso. Tuvo que dolerle, pero ella soportó el dolor en silencio, si bien con una expresión como si fuera ella quien estuviera mordiendo algo, un limón tal vez, y cuando él, extenuado, se apartó un poco, ella le rodeó con su pesado y torpe brazo, con agradecimiento, pero tan fuertemente que él apenas podía respirar e intentó liberarse encolerizado. Más ella no aflojó su abrazo y le habló —era la primera vez que ella le hablaba en esta alcoba—, le habló con su habitual tono opaco y comercial, en el cual, de haber sido Esch más sensible, habría notado algo parecido al

miedo: «¿Por qué has venido tan tarde…? ¿Porque soy un año más vieja?». Esch quedó tan perplejo al oírla hablar que no comprendió el sentido de sus palabras, ni lo intentó siquiera: el imprevisto sonido de su voz fue para él como una conclusión, como un rayo de luz en medio de una hilera interminable y dolorosa de ideas, como una prueba de que todo podía cambiar. Esch dijo: «Estoy harto. Hay que terminar». A la señora Hentjen se le heló la sangre en las venas; casi no podía mover el brazo, que seguía rodeando los hombros de Esch, porque se había quedado rígida, fría, con el cuerpo inerte; el brazo resbaló sin fuerza. Solo comprendía que no debía mostrar su consternación a un hombre, que debía darle ella el pasaporte antes de que él se fuera, y con un gran esfuerzo logró decir en voz baja: «… yo no me he de oponer». Esch pasó por alto estas palabras y añadió: «La semana que viene me iré a Baden». ¿Por qué tenía que comunicárselo a ella? En cierto modo se sintió halagada, ya que la resolución de terminar, por lo que parecía, le turbaba tanto que le impulsaba a poner tierra de por medio. Pero, si realmente quería terminar, no era lógico que volviera a oprimir la boca contra su hombro. ¿O quería simplemente saciar su placer hasta el último instante? ¡De los hombres puede esperarse todo! Sin embargo ella concibió nuevas esperanzas y, aunque le resultaba tremendamente difícil hablar, preguntó: «¿Por qué? ¿Hay allá también una muchacha como la de Ober-Wesel?». Esch rió: «Sí, chicas así también las hay, claro». La señora Hentjen se indignó al ver que, por si fuera poco, él se burlaba de ella: «No tiene ningún mérito hacer escarnio de una débil mujer». Esch seguía pensando en la mujer de Badenweiler y eso aumentó su risa: «Oh, no, no es tan débil esa». La desconfianza de la señora Hentjen aumentó: «¿Quién es?». «Misterio.» Ella guardó silencio, resentida, y soportó inmóvil sus nuevas caricias. Y entre ellas preguntó: «¿Para qué necesitas otra?». Él se resistía a reconocer que esta mujer, con su forma de entregarse, realista, casi oficinesca, y sin embargo tan extrañamente reticente y casta, le proporcionaba mucho más placer y despertaba más agudamente su deseo que cualquier otra, y que en realidad no necesitaba otra mujer. Ella repitió: «¿Para qué necesitas otra mujer? Basta con que lo digas, si es que no soy lo suficiente joven para ti». Esch no respondió, porque de repente le emocionó y llenó de dicha que ella hablase, ella que, hasta ahora, había yacido siempre muda entre sus brazos, moviendo la cabeza, tan muda, tan inmutablemente muda como si aquel silencio hubiera sido una herencia de la época del señor Hentjen. Ella notó su embeleso, y añadió con orgullo: «No necesitas a una joven; puedo competir con cualquier muchacha…». Esto es una locura, pensó Esch dolorosamente, o miente. Y se acordó también con dolor de Harry; lo dijo: «Solo se ama una vez», y como la señora Hentjen dijera simplemente «sí», como si quisiera dar a entender que era a él a quien amaba, se evidenció que realmente mentía: pretendía sentir asco de los hombres, y se sentaba a beber con ellos y permitía que festejaran su cumpleaños; ahora pretendía amarle únicamente a él, cuando en realidad era fría y mecánica. Pero tal vez nada fuera cierto; ella no tenía hijos. De nuevo su deseo de claridad y de absoluto chocó contra un muro infranqueable. ¡Si al menos todo hubiera pasado ya, si hubiera concluido! El viaje a Badenweiler le pareció en este momento un preludio necesario, un indispensable ejercicio previo al viaje a América. Ella, evidentemente, se dio cuenta de que él pensaba en los viajes, pues preguntó:

—¿Qué aspecto tiene?

—¿Quién?

—Bah, la muchacha de Baden.

¿Y Bertrand, qué aspecto tenía? Y más agudamente que nunca reconoció que solo podía imaginar a Bertrand con la imagen de Hentjen. Y dijo bruscamente:

—La foto se tiene que quitar.

—¿Qué foto? —dijo ella sin comprender.

—La de allá abajo —Esch no se atrevió a pronunciar el nombre—, la que está sobre la torre Eiffel.

Ella empezó a comprender, pero se opuso por principio, porque él quería meterse en sus cosas:

—Nunca había molestado a nadie.

—Precisamente por eso —insistió él testarudo, y mientras veía cada vez con mayor claridad que debía ajustar cuentas con Bertrand para liquidar su asunto con Hentjen, continuó con su idea—: Hay que terminar en todos los sentidos.

—Bien… —dijo ella indecisa, y luego, ofuscada su capacidad de comprensión por la rebeldía, agregó—: ¿Terminar con qué?

—Nos vamos a América.

—Sí —dijo ella—, ya lo sé.

Esch se había levantado. Le hubiera gustado pasear por el cuarto, como solía hacer cuando algo le preocupaba, pero en la alcoba no había espacio y en la sala estaban las nueces. Por tanto, se sentó en el borde de la cama. Y aunque quería repetir tan solo las palabras de Harry, las palabras sufrieron una modificación en sus labios:

—El amor solo es posible en el extranjero. Si uno quiere amar de verdad, tiene que empezar una nueva vida y destruir todo lo viejo. Solo en una vida nueva, totalmente extraña, en la que todo el pasado esté tan muerto que ni necesite ser olvidado, pueden dos seres unirse hasta tal punto que para ellos deje de existir el tiempo pasado y deje de existir el mismo tiempo en sí.

—Yo no tengo pasado —dijo mamá Hentjen ofendida.

—Solo entonces —dijo Esch con una mueca perversa muy propia de él y que la señora Hentjen afortunadamente no vio en la oscuridad—, solo entonces ya no habrá que renegar de nada, porque existirá la verdad y la verdad es intemporal.

—Yo nunca he renegado de nada —se defendió mamá Hentjen.

Esch no se dejó confundir:

—La verdad no tiene nada que ver con el mundo, no tiene nada que ver con Mannheim —casi gritaba—, no tiene nada que ver con este viejo mundo.

Mamá Hentjen suspiró. Esch la miró intensamente:

—No hay por qué suspirar; es necesario liberarse del viejo mundo, para ser uno mismo liberado.

Mamá Hentjen volvió a suspirar y, en tono preocupado, dijo:

—¿Y qué va a ser del café? ¿Lo venderemos?

—Hay que hacer algún sacrificio —repuso Esch con firmeza—, pues sin sacrificio no existe redención.

—Si nos vamos de aquí, tendremos que casarnos… —y la voz de mamá Hentjen volvió a reflejar cierto miedo—. ¿Soy demasiado vieja para ti, para que te cases conmigo?

Esch, sentado en el borde de la cama, la contempló a la oscilante luz de la vela. Dibujó con el dedo el número 37 sobre la colcha. Le habría podido dedicar una tarta con treinta y siete velitas; pero era mejor así, ella ocultaba su verdadera edad, solo habría conseguido enfadarla. Esch observó sus rasgos pesados e inertes y de pronto deseó verla aún más vieja. Le parecía más seguro, aunque no sabía por qué. Si ella, de golpe, recobrara la juventud y estuviera ahí tendida con el vestido dorado de la adolescencia, el sacrificio se estropearía. Y tenía que haber sacrificio, el sacrificio tenía que ser cada vez mayor con su entrega a esta mujer que envejecía, a fin de que se estableciera el orden en el mundo e Ilona estuviera a salvo de los cuchillos, a fin de que el estado de inocencia pudiera ser devuelto a todos los vivientes, a fin de que nunca más tuviera que pudrirse un alma en la cárcel. Bueno, en verdad era absolutamente seguro que mamá Hentjen se volvería vieja y fea. El mundo se le aparecía como un corredor liso, pulido e infinito. Pensativo, dijo:

—Habría que recubrir el local con linóleo marrón. Quedaría bonito.

Mamá Hentjen sintió revivir sus esperanzas:

—Sí, y también pintarlo; toda la casa está ya en mal estado. Todos estos años no se ha hecho nada… Pero si tú quieres irte a América…

—Todos estos años… —repitió Esch.

Mamá Hentjen se creyó obligada a justificarse:

—Hay que ahorrar y se va dejando de un año para otro… Y así pasa el tiempo… —Y tras una pausa añadió —: Y uno se hace viejo.

—Cuando no se tienen hijos es ridículo ahorrar —dijo Esch enojado—. Para mí no ha ahorrado nadie.

Pero mamá Hentjen no le escuchaba. Solo le interesaba una cosa: si merecía la pena hacer pintar la taberna.

—¿Me llevarás contigo a América? —le preguntó—. ¿O te llevarás a una joven?

—¿Qué demonios significa ese eterno hablar de juventud y de vejez? Ya no habrá jóvenes ni viejos… Ni siquiera existirá ya el tiempo.

Se quedó cortado. Los viejos no pueden tener hijos. Tal vez esto formaba parte del sacrificio. Pero en estado de inocencia nadie concibe tampoco hijos. Las vírgenes no tienen hijos. Y mientras se deslizaba de nuevo en la cama concluyó:

—Entonces todo será sólido y seguro. Y lo que uno haya dejado tras de sí ya no podrá causarle ningún daño.

Colocó la sábana debidamente y, con mucho cuidado, cubrió también los hombros de mamá Hentjen. Luego cogió el apagavelas de bronce que colgaba de la palmatoria, y que el señor Hentjen habría usado también en semejantes ocasiones, y lo encasquetó sobre la vacilante llama de la vela.

III

Mannheim está en el camino hacia Baden. Y Esch recordó que existen deberes de amistad. Había algo que desde hacía tiempo le preocupaba y ahora sabía lo que era: en un negocio con tantos altibajos, uno no podía descuidar las inversiones de los amigos. Hasta ahora se habían podido obtener unos beneficios de más del cincuenta por ciento y esto estaba muy bien, pero había llegado el momento de poner a salvo lo ganado. Fuera del negocio. Sus trescientos marcos eran otra cosa. Caso de que se perdieran, sería simplemente justo. Porque ganar un cincuenta por ciento y además vivir dos meses y no vivir mal… ¿Dónde quedaba el sacrificio con que uno pretendía liberar a Ilona? ¡Y costear la huida hacia la libertad, hacia América, con dinero pecaminoso era evidentemente una cuenta falsa! Había llegado, pues, la hora de enviar al infierno los combates junto con el dinero. Mamá Hentjen llevaba sobrada razón con su profecía de que tanto él como ese tinglado de teatro femenino acabarían en la vergüenza y en la infamia.

Pero ahora se trataba del dinero de Lohberg y de Erna. Tratar el asunto con Gernerth no resultaba fácil: por las noches el señor director se deshacía en lamentaciones sobre la sala vacía y durante el día era ilocalizable; nunca estaba en el Alhambra, no aparecía por su alojamiento, y en las oficinas de Oppenheimer había dos sucias habitaciones sin nadie en ellas. Si se le preguntaba dónde comía, respondía: «Bah, yo me conformo con un bocadillo; un padre de familia no puede permitirse lujos», lo cual, por supuesto, no respondía a la realidad, pues aquella vez en que un grupo de turistas ingleses se dirigía de la catedral al hotel de enfrente, ¿quién salió del vestíbulo marmóreo del Hotel de la Catedral? El señor Gernerth en persona, ahíto y con un grueso cigarro en la boca. «Visitas de prestigio, querido amigo», había dicho, y se marchó enseguida, como si uno fuera incapaz de comprender que viviera en el Hotel de la Catedral, aun con toda su familia. Pero hoy las cosas habían cambiado: ¡el señor director no podría escapar!

Aquella noche abrió Esch la puerta de la dirección, la cerró tras sí con una sonrisa, se metió la llave en el bolsillo del pantalón y, con la misma sonrisa, presentó al atrapado Gernerth una impecable «Nota de liquidación de beneficios a favor del señor Fritz Lohberg y de la señorita Erna Korn», que demostraba que los susodichos, por su aportación de capital por valor de dos mil marcos, debían percibir una ganancia de mil ciento veintitrés marcos, suma total tres mil ciento veintitrés marcos, y al pie se leía «lo firma por poderes August Esch». Además él también quería su dinero. Gernerth puso el grito en el cielo. En primer lugar Esch carecía de poderes legalizados y en segundo lugar los combates no habían terminado todavía y no se suele hacer reembolso de capital ni reparto de beneficios en un negocio que aún está en marcha. Discutieron durante un buen rato, y finalmente Gernerth, entre profundas lamentaciones, se avino a pagar a Esch la mitad de la suma solicitada para Lohberg y Erna, mientras que la otra mitad continuaba invertida en el negocio y les daba derecho a los futuros beneficios posibles. Para sí mismo, Esch no logró sacar más que cincuenta marcos para el viaje. Tal vez había sido demasiado condescendiente. No obstante, tenía suficiente para el viaje.

La señora Hentjen había acudido a la estación vestida con su traje de seda marrón, y miraba continuamente a su alrededor para ver si había algún conocido que pudiera hacerla objeto de habladurías. Porque, pese a lo temprano de la hora, había mucha gente. En el otro andén se estaba formando un tren que saldría en dirección contraria y al que habían añadido algunos vagones para emigrantes, checos o húngaros, y en torno a los emigrantes se afanaban algunos miembros del Ejército de Salvación. Estaba muy bien que mamá Hentjen le hubiera acompañado; ya iba siendo hora de que ella prescindiera de aquellos absurdos ocultamientos. Pero ante los emigrantes y ante los miembros del Ejército de Salvación, Esch sintió remordimientos. «Cofradías de idiotas», refunfuñó. Dios sabía por qué se alteraba tanto. Cuando una de las chicas salvacionistas pasó cerca de ellos, Esch miró hacia otra parte. La señora Hentjen se dio cuenta: «¿Te da vergüenza que yo esté aquí? ¿Acaso va contigo tu amiga?». Esch le rogó, con bastante grosería por cierto, que no dijera estupideces. Solo le faltaba esto a mamá Hentjen: «Es lo que se logra al comprometerse por un hombre… El que se acuesta con perros, con pulgas se levanta». Esch se preguntó una vez más qué era lo que le mantenía unido a aquella mujer. Al verla ahora frente a él a la luz del día, se esfumaban las imágenes de su disposición sexual y de la oscura alcoba, imágenes que le perseguían en cuanto se separaba de ella, pero ahora estas imágenes se hundían en la nada, como si nunca hubieran existido. En este mismo tren habían ido juntos a Bacharach; entonces empezó todo —tal vez hoy llegaba a su fin—. Ella debió de notar su distanciamiento, pues dijo de pronto: «Si me eres infiel, verás lo que…». Halagado, él quiso hacerle decir más y sintió al mismo tiempo la tentación de herirla: «Bien, pongamos que hoy mismo huyo de ti… ¿Qué es lo que veré?». Ella se quedó rígida y no contestó. A Esch le dio pena y le cogió la mano, que permaneció inerte y pesada entre las suyas: «Bueno, di, ¿qué pasará?». Ella, con la mirada en el vacío, dijo: «Te mataré». Era como una promesa y una esperanza de redención; sin embargo, Esch se esforzó en reír. Pero ella no permitió que él la desviara de su idea: «¿Qué otra cosa podría yo hacer?». Y tras una pausa: «¿Vas tal vez a Ober-Wesel…? ¿A ver a aquella

persona?». Esch se impacientó: «Tonterías. Te he dicho cien veces que he de liquidar unos negocios en Mannheim con Lohberg… Nos queremos ir a América, ¿no?». La señora Hentjen no estaba convencida: «Sé franco». Esch esperaba con ansiedad la señal de salida; de ningún modo quería delatarse y dejar entrever que iba en busca de Bertrand: «¿Acaso no te invité a acompañarme?». «No lo decías en serio.» Ahora, instantes antes de partir, le pareció que en efecto se lo había propuesto en serio y, al cogerla por el brazo rollizo, sintió deseos de besarla; ella le apartó: «¡Estate quieto! ¡Aquí, delante de tanta gente!». Pero Esch tuvo que subir al tren.

En realidad tenía la intención de ir directamente a Badenweiler, y solo al ver el letrero indicador de la estación de St. Goar decidió hacer un alto en Mannheim. Sí, y desde Mannheim escribiría a mamá Hentjen; esto la tranquilizaría. Y Esch sonrió con ternura al pensar que ella quería matarlo; en realidad podía uno arriesgarse. Además, la visita a Badenweiler constituía ya en cierto modo un peligro, como si uno se jugara el todo por el todo, y era un precepto de honradez restituir antes el dinero ajeno. Le vino a la memoria la frase «No se juega con la vida de los seres humanos», entremezclada con el ritmo de las ruedas del tren. Vio a mamá Hentjen levantar un pequeño revólver y oyó de nuevo la voz de Harry que decía: «Tú no le harás nada». Y ahora se alinearon ante él Lohberg, Ilona, la señorita Erna y Balthasar Korn, y se asombró del tiempo que hacía que no los veía; tal vez en el ínterin no habían existido siquiera. Levantaban los brazos rítmicamente al compás para saludarle, y parecía moverlos un eminente e invisible titiritero que tirase de unos hilos aparecidos de repente. Un vagón de tercera clase es como la celda de una cárcel, y allá arriba, en la parte izquierda del escenario, allá donde al hombre le suele faltar un diente, había aparecido un telón gris, un telón de cartón, tras el cual no hay más que los polvorientos y grises muros del escenario. Pero sobre el telón estaba escrita la palabra «cárcel» y, aunque uno sabía que detrás no había nada, sabía también que en la cárcel había alguien, alguien que no existe y que, sin embargo, es el protagonista. Pero el escenario sobre el cual cuelga como si fuera un diente el telón de la cárcel tiene al fondo un enorme panel sobre el cual está pintado un hermoso parque. Los ciervos pacen por entre poderosos árboles y una muchacha con un traje en el que brillan innumerables lentejuelas recoge flores. El jardinero, con un sombrero de paja de anchas alas, las tijeras en la mano y acompañado de un perrito, está de pie junto al estanque, cuyo surtidor lanza al aire un penacho blanco que parece un látigo resplandeciente y refrescante. Muy a lo lejos se vislumbran las luces y los adornos de un suntuoso castillo, en cuyas almenas ondea la bandera negra-blanca-roja. Y esto lo llenaba a uno nuevamente de inseguridad.

A medida que se iba acercando a Mannheim, se le ocurrió que Erna, probablemente, se acostaba con el casto José. En realidad no cabía la menor duda, era tan obvio que uno no necesitaba planteárselo, tan obvio como la nariz que uno tiene en la cara o los pies con los que anda. Nada ni nadie le habría podido hacer cambiar de parecer. ¿Qué podían, sino, hacer aquellos dos? No obstante, se equivocaba. Pues, aunque los contenidos de la vida son mezquinos y no hace falta que exista acuerdo entre dos personas de diferente sexo, muchas cosas son bastante menos obvias de lo que se cree. Aquel que, como Esch, vive cotidianamente lo prosaico de la vida o se ha elevado muy poco por encima de ella, olvida fácilmente que existe un reino de la redención, cuya existencia llena de inseguridad todo lo terreno, hasta tal punto que, en un momento dado, resulta muy poco claro si uno anda o no sobre sus pies, y por tanto todavía es menos claro si dos personas se acuestan juntas o no. En el presente caso, además, ocurría lo siguiente: Lohberg, por una parte, debido a su timidez, no se había atrevido a cruzar la frontera de una noble e íntima amistad, y por otra parte le frenaba también su eterna y susceptible desconfianza frente al sexo femenino, en especial desde que, tras una horrible experiencia, había aprendido a temer el veneno de las enfermedades venéreas, y sobre todo, al pensar que Erna había estado expuesta, puerta con puerta, a todas las insinuaciones de un libertino. Así era Lohberg. Con la señorita Erna Korn no hacía otra cosa que pasear, beber café en su compañía, y consideraba todo esto como un período de purificación y penitencia, el cual no terminaría hasta que le fuese enviada desde lo alto una señal, la señal, por así decirlo, de la auténtica gracia redentora.

Esch conocía la virtud del idiota, pero no podía imaginar la magnitud de tal virtud, y todavía sospechaba menos que él, Esch, no había dejado de inquietar a la señorita Erna, la cual, si no le conservaba en el corazón, sí le llevaba al menos todavía en la sangre y, tal vez por esta razón, ella no se daba ninguna prisa en darle a Lohberg la señal de la gracia redentora, antes al contrario quizá la demoraba intencionadamente porque veía en este aplazamiento un auténtico preámbulo del matrimonio. Esch, en efecto, no podía suponer nada de todo esto y muchísimo menos aún que ambos disfrutasen ocupándose en descubrir rasgos contradictorios de su carácter y que, debido al temperamento algo soñador de ambos, creyeran poseer en este interés común una buena base para su futura unión.

Esch, que ignoraba tal estado de cosas, había contado con un recibimiento caluroso. En lugar de eso, la señorita Erna se quedó de piedra al verle aparecer. «Ah», dijo, pero recobró de inmediato el dominio de sí misma: era muy agradable que el señor Esch se dejara ver de nuevo por allí, era realmente muy amable por su parte el que se dignara, en su bondad, recordarles afectuosamente, pese a que ni siquiera en una ocasión se

había tomado la molestia de enviarles una tarjeta postal. Y añadió: «Sí, alabar a aquel cuyo pan comemos…», y otras chanzas parecidas, de modo que Esch no tuvo siquiera ocasión de entrar en el vestíbulo. Pero Korn, que había oído las voces, salió de la sala de estar en mangas de camisa y, como su sensibilidad era mucho más ruda que la de su hermana y durante aquellos dos meses no había pensado ni una vez en Esch y por esta razón no podía tomar a mal su silencio sino que lo que realmente le habría sorprendido habría sido que a Esch se le hubiera ocurrido escribirle, Korn, pues, se sintió muy complacido, no solo porque guardaba apego a cuanto conocía, sino porque veía en el retorno de Esch una fuente de iniciativas y un plausible ingreso de dinero por la habitación desocupada. Y él necesitaba dinero para Ilona. En consecuencia estrechó la mano del recién llegado entre cordiales muestras de alegría y le invitó de inmediato a ocupar su antigua habitación, la cual, manifestó, le había estado esperando. Tal cordialidad hace mucho bien a un hombre desalentado, y Esch se dispuso a llevar sus pertenencias a la habitación que únicamente le estaba esperando a él, pero la señorita Erna le detuvo, se volvió hacia su hermano ligeramente y le dijo que no sabía si aquello sería posible. «Pero bueno», rugió Korn, «¿por qué no va a ser posible? ¡Si yo digo que es posible, lo es!» Indudablemente Esch, de haber sido un hombre de tacto, habría tenido que retirarse con unas palabras de disculpa, pero aunque hubiera sido un hombre de tacto, y no lo era, estaba demasiado ligado a la familia para subordinar la curiosidad a una cuestión de tacto. ¿Qué había ocurrido allí? Se quedó sencillamente en pie, asombrado. Pero la señorita Erna, que no estaba acostumbrada a callarse, satisfizo muy pronto su curiosidad, pues dijo con voz sibilina a su hermano que a ella, en vísperas de un matrimonio honorable, no se la podía obligar a compartir el techo con un extraño; bastante vergüenza tenía que soportar ya en aquella casa y, desde luego, si su futuro no fuera un hombre de corazón tan magnánimo, ella tendría que correr tras él. A todo esto Korn respondió en su jerga peculiar: «Basta, cierra el pico. Esch se queda aquí». Esch, pasando por alto los comentarios de la señorita Erna, exclamó: «¡Vaya una sorpresa! Mi más cordial enhorabuena. ¿Y quién es el afortunado?». Entonces la señorita Erna no pudo hacer otra cosa que aceptar la felicitación y decirle que pronto se uniría en matrimonio al señor Lohberg. Se cogió de su brazo y lo condujo a la sala de estar. Sí, y su prometido estaba a punto de llegar. Hablando de Lohberg, a Korn se le ocurrió la genial idea de colocar a Esch en un rincón oscuro, a fin de que el señor novio, ignorándolo, se asustara cuando Esch, de repente, interviniera en la conversación como un fantasma.

Cuando sonó la campanilla y Erna se levantó para ir a abrir, Esch, obediente, se colocó en el rincón oscuro. Korn, que había quedado cerca de la mesa, le hacía señas perentorias para que se arrimara todavía más a la pared. Porque Korn era un hombre que concedía enorme valor a la perfección técnica y se enfurecía si algo fallaba en la ejecución. Pero si Esch se quedó quieto en el rincón, no fue porque temiera la ira de Korn, ¡qué va!, él no era un hombre a quien sin más ni más se pudiera esconder en un rincón, y no estaba en un lugar de castigo o humillación; se acercó más a la pared por propia iniciativa, por su voluntad, sin importarle rozar con la manga la pintura, pues en aquel rincón sumido en sombras se despertó en él, súbita e inesperadamente, el deseo de que fuera cada vez mayor la distancia que le separaba a él de los de la mesa. Los escasos minutos que transcurrieron hasta que entró Lohberg no bastaron para aclarar sus ideas, aunque le pareció que se sumergía de nuevo en aquella curiosa soledad que, de un modo u otro, iba unida a Mannheim y que le impedía ligarse a los demás aquí, una acuciante soledad que, sin embargo, le era tan grata que no le parecía lo bastante solitaria, y si él se hundiera simplemente más y más en su rincón se convertiría en un eremita excelso y redimido, encerrado en su celda y de espaldas al mundo, todo él espíritu, por encima de los seres atados a la carne que rodeaban la mesa. Desde luego, esta situación no podía durar mucho tiempo, porque estos pensamientos solo surgen cuando uno no tiene tiempo de pensarlos hasta el final o de ponerlos en práctica, y también Esch había olvidado todas estas ideas cuando Lohberg, de acuerdo con el plan previsto, entró en la habitación. Lohberg quedó tan sorprendido que incluso se alegró de la presencia de Esch. Ciertamente Esch no formaba parte de su mundo, como tampoco Ilona, pero, cuando se sentaron todos juntos en torno a la mesa, eran casi como una familia e intercambiaron preguntas sobre infinidad de cosas. Y dado que estas preguntas recayeron pronto sobre el bienestar de cada uno de ellos, Esch sacó orgullosamente la cartera y el portamonedas y contó 1.561 marcos y 50 pfennigs sobre la mesa. La señorita Erna alargó con alegría la mano para cogerlos, pues creyó que eran el capital aportado más los intereses, pero cuando Esch le explicó que, si bien le correspondía a ella verdaderamente tal cantidad, de momento debía repartirla con Lohberg, puesto que la otra mitad seguía invertida en el negocio, Erna gritó que, en resumidas cuentas, aquello suponía una pérdida y no una ganancia. Y aunque él quiso explicárselo, ella no entró en razón sino que puso el grito en el cielo diciendo que no se dejaría engañar, que ella sabía contar perfectamente: veamos —y fue a buscar un lápiz y una hoja de papel— dos-cien-tos-die-ci-nue-ve marcos y veinticinco pfennigs es lo que ella perdía, ahí estaba, claro como el agua, y continuó refunfuñando al tiempo que agitaba el papel ante las contristadas narices de Esch. Lohberg no despegó los labios; era hombre de negocios y debía de haber entendido muy bien las cuentas. Lo que ocurría es que aquel cobarde idiota no quería enemistarse con su señora novia. Esch dijo en tono insolente: «Uno tiene su honestidad, mucho más que alguno que está aquí y se calla». Y cogió con fuerza el brazo de Erna, no por cariño sino porque estaba furioso, y con muy poca dulzura volvió a poner sobre la mesa el brazo de ella con el papel. Tal vez, en el fondo, ella había comprendido, o simplemente se

debió a la presión de la mano de Esch, la cuestión es que la señorita Erna enmudeció. Korn, que hasta ahora había permanecido al margen, dijo solamente que Teltscher, aquel judío, era un truhán. Bueno, pues solo hacía falta presentar la denuncia, respondió Esch, hay que denunciar a los truhanes en lugar de permitir que se encarcele a los inocentes. Y como la actitud cobarde de Lohberg estaba pidiendo una repulsa, le humilló con estas palabras: «Los inocentes son olvidados. Por ejemplo, ¿ha visitado ya el señor Lohberg al pobre Martin?». Erna, que seguía todavía abochornada y llena de exasperación, replicó con aspereza que ella conocía a otras personas que olvidaban a los amigos y que, por si fuera poco, les causaban perjuicios, y que, desde luego, era asunto del señor Esch el preocuparse por el señor Geyring. «Precisamente por eso he venido», dijo Esch. «Vaya», dijo la señorita Erna, «de lo contrario no le habríamos vuelto a ver el pelo al señor Esch», y vacilando, con timidez casi, pero sintiéndose en cierto modo obligada a no ceder del todo en su lucha denodada, añadió: «Ni tampoco habríamos visto nuestro dinero». Pero Korn, que pensaba con lentitud, dijo: «Haga usted encarcelar a este judío».

Evidentemente era una solución digna de ser tenida en cuenta, y aunque el mismo Esch ya había pensado en ella, le gustó replicar que era solo una mezquina solución parcial, frente a otra mucho mejor, más radical, espiritual, por así decirlo, cuya proximidad él intuía. ¿De qué serviría meter en la cárcel a Teltscher durante un par de meses, si Ilona debía ser expuesta de nuevo a los cuchillos? Y solo ahora se le ocurrió que Ilona, que en realidad pertenecía a todo aquello, no se hallaba presente; casi parecía que debiera evitarse que él la viera antes de haber llevado a cabo su misión. Sea como fuere, que si esta misión, que si la otra… uno piensa en el gran sacrificio que tiene delante ¡y al mismo tiempo promete obtener más beneficios! Si realmente había que imponer orden, el espectáculo de la lucha femenina debía saltar por los aires. Y como suponía que la gruñona Erna seguía invirtiendo su dinero solamente por él, le entró una especie de sentimiento de culpabilidad, el cual, en el fondo, no resultaba desagradable; pero como este no afectaba a los demás, Esch empezó a gritar: este era el agradecimiento, y, desde luego, solo lamentaba haberse molestado en traer el dinero, para que luego le recibieran sí; por lo demás, escribiría a Gernerth respecto a la cantidad pendiente. Podía hacer lo que le diera la gana, dijo la señorita Erna con voz aguda. Pues lo mejor sería que ella misma escribiera, ya que él, explícitamente, había declinado toda responsabilidad. Ella no haría eso. Muy bien, entonces lo haría él, puesto que era un hombre formal. «¿Sí?», dijo simplemente la señorita Erna. Y entonces pidió Esch tinta y papel y se retiró a su cuarto, sin prestar más atención a los presentes.

Ya en su habitación, empezó a pasearse a grandes pasos de un lado a otro, como solía hacer cuando estaba irritado. Luego silbó una cancioncilla, a fin de que los de allá no imaginaran que estaba enfadado, o tal vez silbaba también porque se sentía solo. Al poco rato oyó a Erna y a Lohberg en el vestíbulo. Hablaban en voz baja; evidentemente Lohberg, con lo cobarde que era, temía todavía su furia y, en su desvalimiento, movería sus blancos ojos despavorido. Como en muchas ocasiones, la imagen de Lohberg se fundió con la de mamá Hentjen. Ahora ella también estaba desvalida; no podía evitar el curso de las cosas, la pobre. Aguzó el oído para enterarse de si Erna y Lohberg le criticaban. En bonita situación le había metido mamá Hentjen con sus celos absurdos; nada de eso era necesario; podía haber estado en Badenweiler desde hacía tiempo. En el vestíbulo reinaba el silencio; Lohberg se había ido. Esch tomó asiento y escribió con su pulcra letra de contable: «Señor Alfred Gernerth, director teatral. Dirección actual: Colonia, Teatro Alhambra. Le ruego me transfiera el saldo a mi favor de 780,75 marcos y al mismo tiempo la liquidación definitiva. Atentamente…». Con la cuartilla en una mano, tintero y pluma en la otra, se dirigió sin vacilar al cuarto de Erna.

Erna, calzada con zapatillas de fieltro, estaba precisamente descubriendo la cama, y a Esch le sorprendió la rapidez con que había cambiado de calzado. Ella se disponía ya a enfurecerse por su intromisión, cuando advirtió lo que él traía en la mano: «¿Qué quiere usted con este papelucho?». Él dictó casi una orden: «¡Que me lo firme!». «A usted no le firmo yo nada más…» Pero entretanto había leído la carta y se acercó a la mesa: «Por mí…»; no serviría de nada; el dinero se había esfumado, despilfarrado, había que hacerse a esta idea, si bien a un tal señor Esch le importaba un comino. Ante sus reproches Esch experimentó de nuevo aquella sensación de culpabilidad que a veces notaba frente a ella; nada de eso, ya se ocuparía él de que ella recobrase su dinero, y le cogió la mano para indicarle dónde debía firmar. Cuando ella hizo un gesto brusco para soltarse, él sintió cólera otra vez; retuvo su mano con firmeza, la condujo sin suavidad, y entonces, por segunda vez, la señorita Erna quedó muda y sumisa. De momento él no se dio cuenta y le condujo simplemente la mano al lugar de la firma, pero luego se encontró con su mirada oblicua de lagartija que le observaba desde abajo como con provocación. Y cuando la abrazó, ella apretó la mejilla contra su pecho. No le planteó ningún dilema ni le inquietó lo más mínimo que ella actuara de este modo; era simplemente una reminiscencia del antiguo amor que había sentido por él, o tal vez deseaba vengarse de la falta de hombría de Lohberg, o quizá —y esta idea debía de ser la primera que se le había ocurrido a Esch— ella permitía sencillamente que ocurriera porque él estaba allí, porque así tenía que suceder, porque ya no era necesario seguir luchando por el matrimonio. Las cosas se habían clarificado: para Erna existía un libertador, y él se iría a América con mamá Hentjen; incluso la rabia que sentía por Lohberg se apaciguó, casi experimentó un poco de ternura por aquel pobre idiota que en tantas cosas se parecía a mamá Hentjen, y como la señorita Erna, debido al trato íntimo con su prometido, había adoptado muchas de sus características, daba la impresión,

aunque muy lejana, de que estuviera abrazando en Erna un fragmento de mamá Hentjen, y ya no resultaba, por tanto, una infidelidad. No obstante, el recuerdo de sus viejas querellas no se había borrado del todo; permanecieron un momento indecisos, fue como un instante de hostil castidad, y Esch estuvo a punto, como aquella vez, de volver a su cuarto sin llegar a nada. Entonces ella le hizo de repente señas de que no armara ruido y se apartó de él: fuera había chirriado la puerta del vestíbulo, y Esch comprendió que había llegado Ilona. Se quedaron de pie sin decir nada. Pero cuando se apagaron los pasos y se cerró la puerta en la sala que llevaba a la habitación de Korn, también ellos cayeron uno en brazos del otro.

Cuando más tarde se metió en su cama, Esch no pudo evitar acordarse de mamá Hentjen y pensar que únicamente se había detenido en Mannheim para calmar las celosas sospechas de ella. Y eso es lo que había logrado con sus absurdos celos. Desde luego la había amenazado en broma con serle infiel aquel mismo día. Y así acababa de ocurrir ahora, sin que él tuviera la culpa. Por otra parte, en realidad ni siquiera se trataba de una auténtica infidelidad; no es fácil serle infiel a una mujer como ella. Sin embargo era una marranada. ¿Y por qué? Pues porque debía poner las cuentas en claro sin dilación, porque uno, honestamente, debería estar ya en Badenweiler, en lugar de prestar atención a unos celos tan absurdos. Y esto era lo que se había conseguido. ¡Maldita la gracia que le hacía! Pero ya nada se podía cambiar. Esch se volvió hacia la pared.

Al abrir los ojos reconoció su antigua habitación. A través de las cortinas se filtraba el claro sol de la mañana y lo atravesó como un lanzazo: ¿no tenía que ir al almacén? Entonces recordó que ya nada tenía que ver con la Mittelrheinische y le invadió una agradable sensación de libertad y de vacaciones. Nadie podía ya despertarle para pedirle cuentas. Permaneció en la cama, pese a que ya no le proporcionaba ningún placer, pero podía seguir acostado todo el tiempo que le diera la gana. Era muy probable que ahora mamá Hentjen le matase, pues ella jamás comprendería que él, a pesar de todo, le había seguido siendo fiel; ella querría matarle, y también esto entrañaba una buena y libre seguridad. Aquel que se halla frente a la muerte es libre, y aquel que ha escogido el camino de la libertad ha aceptado la muerte. Vio ante él las almenas de un castillo en las que ondeaba silenciosa la bandera negra, pero podía tratarse de la torre Eiffel, pues ¡quién es capaz de distinguir el futuro del pasado! En el parque hay una tumba, la tumba de una muchacha, la tumba de una muchacha apuñalada. Sí, ante la muerte al hombre le está permitido todo, todo se vuelve libre, gratis por así decirlo y extrañamente desvinculado de cualquier obligación. Estaba permitido acercarse en la calle a cualquier mujer e invitarla a acostarse con uno, y esto no encerraría ningún compromiso, igual que la posesión de Erna, a la que él hoy o mañana abandonará para salir de viaje hacia las tinieblas. La oía fuera, ocupada, moviéndose de un lado a otro, esa pequeña cabra huesuda, y esperaba que entrase como antes, pues uno tiene que aprovecharse mientras todavía ve el sol. Ciertamente mamá Hentjen no era la clase de persona capaz de comprender que el permiso para ser infiel solo se puede comprar mediante una infidelidad, ni tampoco que uno, a pesar de todo, desee ser asesinado por ello; qué sabía ella de una contabilidad tan complicada, cómo hubiera podido descubrir estos errores de contabilidad que se deslizan en el mundo con tanta malicia que únicamente alguien capaz de contar con absoluta exactitud puede morir con la muerte del redentor. Pero el menor descuido podía hacer tambalear el edificio de la libertad. Ahora oyó la voz de la señorita Erna desde la cocina: «¿Se puede llevar ya el café al distinguido señor?». «No», grito Esch, «enseguida voy.» Saltó de la cama, se vistió en un santiamén, tomó el café y se plantó en la parada del tranvía, sorprendido él mismo de la rapidez con que se había desarrollado todo. Solo cuando el tranvía que llevaba a la cárcel se demoró mucho, pensó si le habría sacado tan rápidamente de la cama la idea de visitar la cárcel o la voz de Erna; desde luego no era una voz bonita, especialmente cuando gritaba como la noche anterior. Todavía nadie había hecho huir a Esch a base de gruñidos. O sea, que no había sido la voz; además, en este caso, la voz le habría hecho huir de la casa mucho antes, como por ejemplo aquella vez en que ella le llamó a la cocina para que viera a Ilona durmiendo. Además ya no necesitaba ver a Ilona, ni allí ni en ninguna parte. Lo mejor era mantenerse apartado de estas cosas, no saber nada, ignorar que probablemente se trataba de una huida de Erna y de sus malos deseos, huida de este placer desligado de todo compromiso, y en el que probablemente todo debía ocurrir, pero que temía la luz del día, porque solamente la noche es el tiempo de la libertad.

En la cárcel le dijeron que únicamente estaban permitidas las visitas tres días por semana; tendría que volver mañana. Esch reflexionó. ¿Qué hacer? ¿Seguir viaje a Badenweiler? Empezó a soltar imprecaciones, porque le habían coartado la libertad de sus actos. Finalmente dijo: «Está bien, última prórroga», y la expresión «última prórroga» se le quedó en la mente, arrellanada en sus oídos, e incluso llegó a producirle cierta sensación de camaradería, un orgulloso sentimiento de compañerismo con un hombre tan poderoso como el presidente Bertrand, ya que esta «última prórroga» le había sido concedida tanto a él como a dicho hombre. No, no podía marcharse, no podía partir hacia la oscuridad sin haber visto antes a Martin y, además, habría sido ridículo, indigno, que esta breve estancia en Mannheim solo hubiera servido para acostarse una noche con Erna. Cuando uno emprende un largo viaje, no deja nada en desorden tras de sí; había que saludar a la gente y despedirse. Así pues se encaminó al puerto, a fin de ver si encontraba a sus conocidos en los

almacenes o en la cantina. Se sentía casi como un pariente que regresa del lejano continente americano en busca de los seres queridos, y al que turba un poco la posibilidad de no ser reconocido con la barba crecida. Era muy posible que los vigilantes de la entrada no le permitieran pasar. Pero todo se desarrolló de modo sumamente agradable, en especial porque todos aquellos con quienes se encontró sabían muy bien que él allí no significaba ya nada; los aduaneros le saludaron inmediatamente con vacilante cordialidad y entabló con ellos una breve conversación. Le dijeron riendo que él, puesto que ya no trabajaba en la compañía naviera, nada tenía que hacer allí, y Esch les respondió que ya verían lo que tenía que hacer, y como no hicieron el menor movimiento para detenerle siguió adelante. Nadie le impidió contemplar a plena satisfacción las dársenas y las grúas, los almacenes y los vagones de mercancías, y cuando saludó a gritos a los que estaban en los almacenes, se acercaron los contramaestres y los empleados a saludarle y le rodearon como hermanos. Pero no sintió ningún remordimiento por haber abandonado todo aquello, simplemente iba grabando en su mente todos los detalles y de vez en cuando pasaba la mano por algún vagón o por alguna rampa de carga, y la sensación de la madera reseca se le quedaba en la palma de la mano. Solo en la cantina tuvo una decepción: buscó a Korn con la mirada y Korn no estaba allí; Korn era tonto y tenía miedo, y Esch no pudo contener la risa, pues él ya no le guardaba ningún rencor por lo de Ilona; de todos modos Ilona sería arrebatada del mundo y desaparecería en un castillo inasequible. Bebió, pues, simplemente una copa en compañía del policía y luego tomó el camino acostumbrado, que ya no lo era casi, pero que sin embargo se le ofrecía ahora más familiar que nunca. Llegó a la esquina donde se encontraba el estanco, que parecía mirarle y estarle esperando, como si el propio Lohberg le estuviera aguardando, lleno de nostalgia, para charlar con él.

Efectivamente ahí estaba Lohberg, sentado tras la caja registradora y sosteniendo en la mano el gran cortacigarros, y cuando Esch entró, dejó a un lado el instrumento con amabilidad, pues debía disculparse de muchas cosas ante Esch, pero ninguno de los dos dijo nada al respecto, porque Esch estaba predispuesto a perdonar y no quería que Lohberg llorase. Tal vez iba en contra de lo tácitamente convenido el que Lohberg empezara a hablar de Erna, pero fue un detalle tan nimio que Esch apenas le concedió importancia. ¿Quién podría despertarle antes de que él lo permitiera? ¡Era libre! «Es una magnífica compañera», dijo Lohberg, «y tenemos mucho en común.» Y como Esch era libre para decir lo que le viniera en gana, dijo: «Sí, ella no le matará a usted»; y observó la raquítica figura de Lohberg, al que mamá Hentjen podría aplastar con un pulgar, y sintió pena hacia Erna porque ni siquiera era capaz de hacer eso. Lohberg sonrió con temor, sentía un poco de miedo a las bromas macabras y se fue empobreciendo y empequeñeciendo bajo la mirada de su feroz visitante. No, no era un contrincante con quien Esch quisiera medir sus fuerzas; solo los muertos son fuertes, por más que en vida tuvieran un raquítico aspecto de aprendices de sastre. Esch se paseó por la tienda como un espíritu, olió el aire, abriendo ahora un cajón, ahora otro, pasó la mano por encima del pulido mostrador. Dijo: «Si usted está muerto, será más fuerte que yo… Pero a usted no se le puede matar», añadió despectivamente, pues se le ocurrió que ni siquiera un Lohberg muerto tendría importancia alguna; le conocía muy bien, ese sería eternamente un idiota, y solo aquellos a los que nunca se ha conocido, aquellos que nunca han vivido, son los más fuertes. Pero Lohberg, desconfiado cuando se trataba de mujeres, dijo: «¿Qué quiere usted decir con eso? ¿Se refiere a la pensión de viudedad? Yo me he hecho un seguro de vida». «Esa sí sería una buena razón para envenenar a un hombre», dijo Esch, y le entró tal ataque de risa que la garganta se le agarrotó. Mamá Hentjen, ¡esa sí era una mujer! Ella no empleaba veneno; a un hombre como Lohberg lo ensartaría sencillamente con una aguja como si fuera un escarabajo. Ante ella había que tener respeto y admiración, y a Esch le extrañó que se le hubiera podido ocurrir compararla con Lohberg. Y le emocionó un poco pensar que ella, además, aparentaba ser una débil mujer, y era muy posible que eso fuera en realidad. A Lohberg se le puso la piel de gallina, sus ojos saltones daban vueltas: «Veneno», dijo, como si oyera esta palabra, que precisamente usaba con tanta frecuencia, por primera vez en su vida, o al menos la oyera por primera vez en su versión definitiva. La risa de Esch se tornó más suave y un poco despectiva:

—Ella no le envenenará. Erna no es capaz de una cosa así.

—No —dijo Lohberg—, tiene un corazón de oro; ni siquiera es capaz de hacer daño a una mosca…

—Ni de atravesar un escarabajo con un alfiler.

—Qué va, seguro que no —dijo Lohberg.

—Pero si usted le llega a ser infiel, ella le matará a pesar de todo —le amenazó Esch.

—Yo nunca seré infiel a mi esposa —especificó aquel idiota.

Ahora Esch, repentinamente, supo por qué —y fue una revelación muy clara y agradable— había podido comparar a mamá Hentjen con Lohberg: Lohberg, en realidad, solo era una criada, una especie de travesti, y por eso carecía de importancia que se acostara con Erna; también Ilona se había acostado en la cama de Erna. Esch se puso en pie, firme y robusto sobre sus piernas, y extendió los brazos como alguien que acaba de despertar o como un crucificado. Se sentía fuerte, duro, bien plantado, un tipo al que merecía la pena matar. «O él o yo», dijo, y sintió que el mundo le pertenecía. «O él o yo», repitió, mientras medía a grandes zancadas el local. «¿Qué quiere usted decir?», preguntó Lohberg. «No me refiero a usted», respondió Esch, mostrándole su dentadura de caballo: «Usted…, usted tendrá a Erna», y era justo que así fuese: aquel hombre tenía una hermosa y pulida tienda, así como un seguro de vida; recibiría a la pequeña Erna y podría vivir sin

sufrimientos y sin devanarse los sesos; él, en cambio, no podía dormir en paz y había tomado sobre sus hombros una misión. Y como Lohberg continuó ensalzando a Erna en términos apasionados, Esch dijo lo que Lohberg quería oír, lo que esperaba desde hacía mucho tiempo como una señal de lo alto: «Bah, usted con sus tonterías del Ejército de Salvación… Como siga mucho tiempo cruzado de brazos, esta chica se le escapará de las manos. Ya sería hora de que se decidiera. Usted, paladín de la limonada». «Sí», dijo Lohberg, «sí, creo que se ha cumplido el tiempo de la purificación.» A la luz de aquel día de verano un tanto gris la tienda aparecía clara y agradable; sus amarillentos muebles de encina producían impresión de seguridad y solidez, y junto a la caja registradora había un libro con columnas de cifras sin tachaduras. Esch tomó asiento en el escritorio de Lohberg y escribió a mamá Hentjen que había llegado bien y que estaba en vías de solucionar sus asuntos.

Consideró que pasar esta segunda noche de nuevo con Erna era una formalidad a la que un hombre libre tenía perfecto derecho. Habían hablado amistosamente de la boda con Lohberg e hicieron el amor casi con ternura y melancolía, como si nunca se hubieran peleado. Y tras esta larga noche en vela, Esch se levantó de la cama con la agradable sensación de haber contribuido a la felicidad de Erna y de Lohberg. El ser humano lleva en sí infinitas posibilidades y, según sea la cadena lógica con que enlace las cosas, puede probarse a sí mismo que son buenas o malas.

Inmediatamente después de comer se puso en camino hacia la cárcel. En la tienda de Lohberg compró unos cigarrillos que pensaba llevar a Martin; no se le ocurría otra cosa. Hacía un calor agobiante y Esch no pudo evitar acordarse de aquella tarde en Goarshausen en que había sentido compasión de Martin a consecuencia del calor. En la cárcel, fue llevado al locutorio, cuyas ventanas enrejadas daban al desnudo patio interior. Las edificaciones pintadas de amarillo proyectaban sombras de ángulos agudos sobre el patio vacío. Sin duda en el centro de aquel patio podía levantarse el patíbulo, en el cual debe arrodillarse el delincuente, para esperar el filo del hacha que caerá sobre su nuca y le cortará la cabeza. En cuanto Esch pensó esto, no quiso seguir mirando el patio y se apartó de la ventana. Observó la estancia. En medio había una mesa pintada de amarillo; las manchas de tinta denotaban que había sido traída de cualquier oficina; había también algunas sillas. El cuarto ardía pese a estar en sombras, porque el sol del mediodía había entrado en él con sus ardientes rayos y las ventanas estaban cerradas. Esch sintió sueño; estaba solo y se sentó; le dejaron allí, esperando.

Finalmente oyó pasos en el pasillo enlosado y el ruido de las muletas de Martin. Esch se puso de pie como para recibir a un superior. Pero Martin entró en la habitación de la misma manera que entraba en la taberna de mamá Hentjen. Si hubiera habido allí una pianola, se habría acercado a ella y la habría puesto en marcha. Recorrió la habitación con la mirada y pareció satisfecho al comprobar que Esch estaba solo; se dirigió hacia él y le dio la mano: «Hola, Esch, me gusta que hayas venido a verme». Apoyó las muletas en la mesa, como lo había hecho siempre en la taberna de mamá Hentjen, y se dejó caer en una silla: «Bueno, siéntate tú también, Esch». El vigilante que le acompañaba se parecía a Korn debido al uniforme; siguiendo las normas del centro, se quedó de pie junto a la puerta. «¿No quiere sentarse usted también, señor inspector? No vendrá nadie más y puede usted estar seguro de que no me escaparé.» El hombre murmuró algo respecto al reglamento, pero se acercó a la mesa y depositó encima su enorme manojo de llaves. «Así», dijo Martin, «ahora estamos mejor», y los tres hombres permanecieron en silencio, sentados en torno a la mesa, contemplando las muescas de la madera. Martin estaba más amarillo que nunca; Esch no se atrevía a preguntarle cómo se encontraba. Fue Martin quien, ante el embarazoso silencio, dijo: «Bueno, ¿qué hay de nuevo por Colonia? ¿Cómo están mamá Hentjen y los demás?».

Esch, pese a que ya tenía las mejillas encendidas por el calor, sintió que enrojecía, pues de pronto tuvo la impresión de haber aprovechado la reclusión del detenido para robarle los amigos. Y tampoco sabía si podía mencionarlos en presencia del guardián. En definitiva a nadie le gusta que se hable de sus relaciones con un delincuente en el locutorio de una penitenciaría. Dijo simplemente:

—Todos están bien.

Martin debió de comprender sus escrúpulos puesto que no exigió una respuesta más explícita, sino que preguntó:

—¿Y tú?

—Voy a Badenweiler.

—¿Para un tratamiento?

A Esch le pareció que Martin no tenía por qué bromear a su costa.

—Para ver a Bertrand —respondió secamente.

—¡Caray, eso sí que es un progreso! Un hombre muy distinguido ese Bertrand.

Esch no vio muy claro si Martin seguía guaseándose de él o si, como solía hacer, hablaba irónicamente. Un maricón muy distinguido el tal Bertrand, ciertamente. Pero no podía decir una cosa así en presencia del guardián. Gruñó:

—Bueno, si fuera un hombre tan distinguido, tú no estarías aquí.

—¿…?

—Tú eres inocente.

—¿Yo? Pero si tengo pruebas convincentes, judiciales incluso, de que he perdido mi inocencia en más de una ocasión.

—Deja de una vez esas bromas estúpidas. Si Bertrand es realmente un hombre distinguido hay que contarle lo que sucedió entonces. Y él se ocupará de que salgas de aquí.

—¿Y con eso quieres molestarlo? ¿Para eso vas a Badenweiler? —Martin se rió y le tendió la mano por encima de la mesa—: Pero August ¡qué te pasa! Por suerte este hombre no estará allí…

—¿Dónde está? —preguntó Esch rápidamente.

—Oh, está siempre de viaje, por América o por cualquier otro sitio.

Esch quedó perplejo: ¡o sea que Bertrand estaba en América! Le había tomado la delantera, había llegado antes que él a la más radiante libertad. Y aunque desde siempre había presentido que la grandeza y la libertad de aquel lejano país tenían que estar en relación significativa, aunque no completamente comprensible, con la grandeza y la libertad de aquel hombre inasequible, le pareció ahora a Esch que sus propios proyectos de emigración quedaban destruidos para siempre a causa de un viaje a América del presidente. Y por ser esto así, por ser todo tan lejano e inasequible, se enfureció contra Martin:

—Un presidente puede irse con facilidad a América… Pero también podría ser Italia.

Martin dijo conciliador:

—Por mí, como quieras, que sea Italia.

Esch reflexionó sobre si debía informarse en la oficina central de la Mittelrheinische acerca de dónde se encontraba Bertrand. Pero de pronto lo consideró inútil y dijo:

—Está en Badenweiler.

Martin rió:

—Bueno, puede que tengas razón; de todos modos no te dejarán llegar hasta él… ¿Hay alguna muchacha detrás de este viaje, verdad?

—Encontraré el medio de que me reciba —dijo Esch amenazador.

Martin barruntó algo:

—No hagas tonterías, August. No molestes a ese hombre; es un tipo decente al que hay que respetar.

Evidentemente no tenía ni idea de todo lo que se ocultaba detrás de Bertrand, pensó Esch, pero no podía decir nada, así que se limitó a decir:

—Decentes lo son todos, incluso Nentwig —calló unos instantes y luego añadió—: También los muertos eran decentes, desde luego, pero solo se puede ver de qué decencia se trata constatando la herencia que le han dejado a uno.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso?

Esch se encogió de hombros:

—Nada, solo quería decir que… Bueno, que en definitiva tanto da una persona decente o no; siempre lo es únicamente en parte; no importa nada la persona, lo único que vale es lo que ha hecho. —Y concluyó furioso —: De lo contrario, no hay forma de distinguirse de los demás.

Martin movió la cabeza entre divertido y preocupado:

—August, tú tienes aquí en Mannheim un amigo que continuamente desbarra acerca de venenos. Tengo la impresión de que te ha envenenado.

Pero Esch, sin dejarse inmutar, prosiguió:

—Ya no se sabe lo que es blanco y lo que es negro. Todo está revuelto. No sabes siquiera lo que ha sucedido ni lo que sucede…

Martin rió otra vez:

—Y mucho menos sé todavía lo que sucederá.

—Tómate las cosas en serio de una vez. Tú te sacrificas por el futuro; tú mismo lo has dicho… Esto es lo único que perdura: sacrificarse por el futuro y expiar por el pasado. Un hombre cabal se sacrifica, porque de lo contrario no existe el orden.

El guardián escuchaba con desconfianza:

—No se pueden mantener conversaciones revolucionarias.

—No es un revolucionario, señor guardián —dijo Martin—, antes lo sería usted.

Esch quedó estupefacto al ver cómo era interpretada su manera de pensar. ¡O sea que él ahora era un socialdemócrata! ¡Muy bien! Y prosiguió tercamente:

—Por mí, pongamos que eso sea revolucionario. Por lo demás, tú siempre has predicado que no importa el que un capitalista sea o no un hombre de bien, ya que se le debe combatir como capitalista y no como hombre.

—¿Ve usted, señor inspector? —dijo Martin—. ¿Vale la pena recibir visitas? Este hombre acabará por envenenarme el alma con sus palabras. Ahora que precisamente me estaba purificando. —Y volviéndose a Esch, añadió—: Sigues siendo el iluso de siempre, querido August.

—El servicio es el servicio —dijo el guardián, y como además hacía demasiado calor, miró el reloj y

anunció que la hora de visita había terminado. Martin cogió las muletas:

—Bueno, se me llevan otra vez. —Le dio la mano a Esch—. Y permíteme que te lo repita, August, ¡no hagas ninguna tontería! Y muchas gracias por todo.

Esch no estaba preparado para una partida tan brusca. Retuvo la mano de Martin en la suya y se preguntó si también debía estrechar la del guardián enemigo. Se la tendió, porque se habían sentado juntos a la misma mesa, y Martin lo aprobó con un gesto. Luego Martin se fue, y a Esch le sorprendió de nuevo el que Martin saliera del mismo modo en que salía del local de mamá Hentjen. ¡Y lo llevaban a la celda de la cárcel! Realmente parecía que todo cuanto ocurriera en el mundo careciera de importancia. Y sin embargo todas las cosas tenían su importancia: lo que había que hacer era simplemente conquistarlas.

Esch respiró hondo al llegar a la puerta de la cárcel; se palpó el cuerpo como para cerciorarse de su propia presencia y al hacerlo se encontró con los cigarrillos destinados a Martin, que se le habían quedado en el bolsillo, y de nuevo sintió aquella maldita e inexplicable ira y otra vez se le llenó la boca de palabras insultantes. Incluso llamó a Martin ridículo orador popular, demagogo, según suele decirse, aunque en el fondo no podía reprocharle nada, a lo sumo que actuara como si fuera el personaje fundamental, cuando, en este caso, estaba verdaderamente en juego algo más importante. Pero así son precisamente los demagogos.

Esch regresó a la ciudad, se irritó porque el cobrador del tranvía vestía uniforme y fue a recoger sus cosas a casa de la señorita Erna. Ella le recibió con vivas muestras de afecto. Dada su cólera contra el laberinto inextricable que era el mundo, Esch la dejó hacer, por desprecio. Se despidió inmediatamente y se dirigió a toda prisa a la estación, para alcanzar el tren nocturno a Müllheim.

Cuando los deseos y objetivos toman cuerpo, cuando el sueño avanza hasta los radicales cambios y conmociones de la vida, el camino se va estrechando en oscuras galerías y el sueño que precede a la muerte se cierne sobre aquel que había estado caminando en sueños: todo lo pasado, los deseos, los objetivos, se deslizan de nuevo frente a él como ante la mirada del moribundo y casi puede considerarse un azar que todo ello no desemboque en la muerte.

El hombre que, estando muy lejos, siente añoranza de su mujer o de la patria de su infancia, se encuentra al comienzo del sonambulismo.

Tal vez se estaban preparando en él muchas cosas, pero no se había dado cuenta. Así por ejemplo cuando, camino de la estación, advierte que las casas constan de ladrillos colocados unos sobre otros, las puertas de tablas serradas y las ventanas de cristales cuadrados. O cuando se acuerda de los periodistas y demagogos que actúan como si supieran dónde está la derecha y dónde está la izquierda, cuando esto lo saben únicamente las mujeres, y ni siquiera todas ellas. Pero no siempre se puede estar pensando en estas cosas y, con el espíritu tranquilo, él bebe una cerveza en la estación.

Pero cuando ve acercarse chirriando el tren que lo conducirá a Müllheim, ese largo y enorme gusano tan certeramente disparado hacia la meta, le asalta repentinamente un temor, una duda sobre la seguridad de la locomotora, la cual tal vez puede errar el camino; tiene miedo a que él, que a todas luces ha de cumplir importantes obligaciones terrenales, pueda ser apartado de dichas obligaciones e incluso ser llevado finalmente por la fuerza a América.

Sumido en dudas, habría preferido, como lo hace un viajero inexperto, acercarse a preguntar a un empleado de uniforme, pero el andén es tan vasto, tan inconmensurablemente largo y desolado, que uno debe considerarse afortunado si alcanza felizmente, aunque sin resuello, ese tren, vaya a donde vaya. Naturalmente uno se esfuerza en descifrar los letreros de los vagones que indican el destino del viaje, pero comprende muy pronto que es inútil, pues los letreros muestran únicamente palabras. Y el viajero se queda de pie ante el vagón, dudando.

La indecisión y la falta de aliento son con seguridad suficientes para obligar a un hombre de temperamento colérico a deshacerse en improperios y, con mayor razón, si, acosado por la señal de salida del tren, trepa apresuradamente por los incómodos peldaños del coche y se da con el estribo un fuerte golpe en la espinilla. Maldice, maldice los estribos del tren, maldice su absurda construcción, maldice el destino. No obstante, detrás de esta vulgaridad se oculta un conocimiento exacto, un conocimiento excitante incluso, y si el hombre tuviera una visión clara de las cosas podría manifestarlo perfectamente: todo esto es simplemente obra del ser humano; oh sí, esos escalones adaptados a la flexión y extensión de la rodilla humana, ese inconmensurable y largo andén, esos letreros con palabras escritas, el silbato de la locomotora, los raíles de acero brillante, son una plenitud de obras humanas, hijas todas ellas de la esterilidad.

El viajero adivina, oscuramente, que estas reflexiones lo elevan por encima de lo cotidiano y le gustaría grabárselas en la mente para toda su vida. Porque, si tales consideraciones merecen ser calificadas de humanas en términos generales, los viajeros están más predispuestos a ellas (especialmente aquellos de temperamento violento) que los hombres sedentarios, que nunca piensan nada, por más que suban y bajen varias veces al día las escaleras de su casa. El hombre sedentario no se da cuenta de que se halla rodeado de obras humanas, ni tampoco de que sus pensamientos son también únicamente meras obras humanas. El hombre sedentario lanza sus pensamientos al mundo como si fueran viajantes seguros y hábiles en los negocios, y cree poder constreñir de esta manera el mundo a las dimensiones de su propia habitación y de su propio negocio.

Pero el hombre que en vez de enviar de viaje sus pensamientos se envía a sí mismo, ha perdido esta precipitada seguridad; su ira se ensaña contra cuanto sea obra humana, contra los ingenieros que construyen los peldaños así y no de otro modo, contra los demagogos que despotrican sobre justicia, orden y libertad como si pudieran edificar un mundo acorde con sus propias ideas; contra aquellos que todo lo saben se dirige también la ira de este hombre en quien alborea el saber de la ignorancia.

Una dolorosa libertad se anuncia proclamando que todo podría ser distinto. Las palabras con que se revisten las cosas pasan inadvertidas y se deslizan en la incertidumbre; se diría que las palabras son huérfanas. El viajero avanza inseguro por el largo corredor del vagón, un tanto extrañado de que haya ventanillas con cristales como en las casas, y pasa la mano por su fría superficie. Y de este modo el hombre que va de viaje cae fácilmente en un estado de falta de responsabilidad sin compromisos. Y cuando el tren, ya en plena marcha, parece perseguir implacable su objetivo, parece tender hacia la irresponsabilidad, y su marcha desenfrenada solo podría ser detenida a lo sumo mediante el freno de emergencia, cuando el viajero es arrastrado velozmente por debajo de sus pies, él, que no ha perdido su conciencia bajo la dolorosa libertad de la luz del día, intenta caminar en dirección contraria. Pero no puede llegar a ninguna parte, pues aquí todo es futuro.

Unas ruedas de acero le separan de la espléndida tierra firme, y el viajero, de pie en el pasillo, piensa en barcos con largos corredores donde se alinean camarote tras camarote, flotando sobre una montaña de agua, muy por encima del fondo del mar, que es la tierra. ¡Dulce esperanza nunca cumplida! De qué sirve arrastrarse dentro de la panza de un barco, si únicamente puede proporcionar libertad el homicidio… Ah, el barco nunca arribará al castillo donde vive la amada. El viajero deja de caminar por el pasillo y, mientras finge contemplar el paisaje y los lejanos villorrios, aplasta la nariz contra el cristal de la ventanilla como lo hacía de niño. ¡Libertad y homicidio, tan estrechamente emparentados como procreación y muerte! Y aquel que es arrojado al seno de la libertad está tan huérfano como el asesino que, camino del patíbulo, llama a su madre a gritos. En el tren que se precipita rugiendo hacia la lejanía todo es futuro, porque a cada segundo corresponde ya otro lugar, y las gentes de los vagones están contentas, como si supieran que escaparán a la expiación. Aquellos que se han quedado en el andén hicieron un último intento, gritando y agitando pañuelos, para conmover las conciencias de los que huyen y hacerlos regresar a sus obligaciones, pero los viajeros ya no renuncian a la responsabilidad, cierran la ventanilla alegando que temen coger tortícolis por la corriente de aire, y sacan las provisiones que ya no necesitan compartir con nadie.

Muchos de ellos han metido el billete en el sombrero, a fin de que su inocencia sea reconocible desde lejos, pero la mayoría busca el billete con nerviosa angustia, cuando suena la voz de la conciencia y aparece el empleado uniformado. Aquel que piensa en el asesinato es descubierto rápidamente y de nada le sirve comer, a tontas y a locas como un niño, toda clase de alimentos y dulces; sigue siendo la última comida del condenado a muerte.

Están sentados en bancos, cuyos constructores, sin sentido del pudor y de modo tal vez precipitado, los han adaptado a la forma dividida en dos del cuerpo sentado; están sentados ahí, alineados de ocho en ocho, apretados unos contra otros en su cárcel de tablas; sus cabezas oscilan y oyen los crujidos de la madera y el suave chirriar de la estructura sobre las ruedas que giran en los raíles. Los que están sentados en la dirección de la marcha desprecian a los demás que miran hacia el pasado; todos temen las corrientes de aire y, cuando la puerta se abre de repente, tienen miedo del hombre que podría llegar y retorcerles el pescuezo. Pues aquel a quien esto ocurre ya no sabe nada acerca de la justicia que existe entre la culpa y la expiación; duda de que dos y dos sean cuatro, duda de ser hijo de su propia madre o de si es tal vez un engendro. Por eso las puntas de sus pies están orientadas cuidadosamente hacia delante e indican los negocios que se deben realizar. Pues en los negocios que realizan está su comunidad. Una comunidad que carece de fuerza, y está llena de inseguridad y mala voluntad.

Solamente la madre puede tranquilizar al hijo y asegurarle que no es un engendro. Los viajeros y los huérfanos, en cambio, todos aquellos que queman los puentes tras de sí, ignoran lo que será de ellos. Arrojados al seno de la libertad, han de edificar de nuevo el orden y la justicia; no quieren seguir dejándose engañar por los ingenieros y los demagogos, odian la obra del hombre en todas sus manifestaciones estatales y técnicas, pero no se atreven a rebelarse contra ese malentendido milenario ni a provocar la terrible revolución del conocimiento que llevaría a reconocer que dos y dos ya no pueden sumarse. Pues no existe nadie que les pueda garantizar la inocencia perdida y recobrada, nadie en cuyo regazo puedan descansar la cabeza, para escapar en el olvido a la libertad del día.

La ira aguza los sentidos. Los viajeros han ordenado sus equipajes en las redes con sumo cuidado, mantienen conversaciones críticas y enfurecidas sobre las instituciones políticas del Reich, sobre el orden público y sobre las leyes; critican cosas e instituciones con agudeza, aunque con palabras en cuya exactitud ellos, en justicia, ya no pueden creer. Y con el remordimiento de la libertad en sus conciencias, temen el trágico accidente de tren en el que la estructura de acero, aguda y punzante, les atravesaría el cuerpo. Cosas así se leen con frecuencia en los periódicos.

Pero ellos son como personas a las que se hubiese despertado excesivamente pronto del sueño, llamándolas

a la libertad, para que alcanzaran puntuales al tren. Por eso sus palabras son cada vez más inseguras y soñolientas, hasta terminar en un confuso murmullo. Uno u otro añade aún que prefiere cerrar los ojos a contemplar la vida a una velocidad tan delirante, pero los compañeros de viaje, refugiándose en el sueño, ya no le escuchan. Se duermen con los puños cerrados y el abrigo sobre la cara, y sus sueños están llenos de odio contra ingenieros y demagogos que, con la sabiduría de los impíos, llaman a las cosas con nombres falsos, y son tan desvergonzados en su falsedad que el sueño encolerizado tiene que imponer a las cosas nombres nuevos, nombres vacilantes, pero llenos del anhelo de que la madre les dé los nombres justos y de que el mundo sea seguro como una patria estable.

Las cosas están demasiado cerca y demasiado lejos, como para un niño, y el viajero que ha subido al tren y desde lejos siente añoranza de su mujer o de su país natal es como alguien que empezara a perder la visión y sintiera de pronto el sordo temor a quedarse ciego. Muchas cosas a su alrededor se han tornado confusas, al menos eso cree él en cuanto se cubre el rostro con el abrigo, y sin embargo se inicia en él un conocimiento que tal vez poseía ya, pero al que no había prestado atención. Se encuentra en el umbral del sonambulismo. Continúa aún por la vía que han preparado los ingenieros, pero ahora camina solamente por el borde, con peligro de precipitarse al vacío. Oye todavía la voz de los demagogos, pero para él ya no es un lenguaje. Extiende los brazos a los lados y hacia delante, igual al triste funámbulo que sabe sostenerse mejor cuanto más lejos está de la hermosa tierra. Paralizada y dominada, flota el alma prisionera en el vacío, y el durmiente se desliza hacia arriba, donde las alas de los amantes rozan su aliento como la pelusilla que se coloca en los labios de los muertos, y él desea, como si fuera un niño, que le pregunten su nombre, a fin de sumergirse sin soñar en los brazos de la mujer, mientras aspira el aire de la patria. Todavía no se ha elevado del todo, pero se encuentra ya en un pequeño primer peldaño de la nostalgia, pues ha dejado de saber cuál es su propio nombre.

Que venga Aquel que toma sobre sí la muerte en holocausto y redime el mundo para conducirlo al estado de una nueva inocencia: eterno deseo del hombre que se eleva hasta llegar al homicidio, eterno sueño que se eleva hasta la clarividencia. Todo el saber oscila entre el deseo soñado y el sueño presentido, es la sabiduría del sacrificio y del reino de la redención.

Había pasado la noche en Müllheim. Cuando subió al pequeño tren que había de conducirle a Badenweiler, las verdes montañas de la Selva Negra yacían bajo el fresco aire mañanero y estival. El mundo aparecía claro y cercano como un juguete peligroso. La locomotora resollaba tanto que uno gustosamente le habría desabrochado algunos botones del cuello, pero no se sabía si realmente arrastraba el tren deprisa o despacio. No obstante, uno podía confiar en ella con absoluta despreocupación. Cuando se detuvo la locomotora, los árboles saludaron con más alegría que nunca, y, rodeado de suaves perfumes, se levantaba, junto al edificio de la estación, un quiosco con un gran surtido de hermosas tarjetas postales. Todas ellas habrían encajado en la colección de mamá Hentjen, y Esch escogió una muy bonita en la que se veía el Schlossberg, se la puso en el bolsillo y buscó un banco a la sombra donde sentarse para escribir en paz. Pero no escribió. Se quedó sentado muy tranquilo, como quien no tiene que atender ya a nada, y sus manos descansaron apaciblemente sobre sus rodillas. Estuvo así mucho tiempo, contempló con los ojos entornados el verdor de los árboles; estuvo sentado así tanto rato que, con extrañeza, vio que ya no sabía cómo había llegado hasta allí, cuando se encontró andando por las calles sosegadas en las que respiraban los seres humanos. Frente a una casa había un automóvil amenazador y Esch lo observó, considerando si sería adecuado para pasar noches en él. Relajado, observó también otras cosas, pues se habían apoderado de él la seguridad y la soltura del jinete que ha alcanzado la meta, se vuelve hacia atrás sin desmontar y contempla a los demás, que están todavía muy lejos; desaparece de él toda tensión y cómodamente, casi vacilando, recorre el último trecho, pues anhela vivamente que se le presente otro obstáculo especialmente alto y difícil antes de alcanzar la meta y apoderarse de la segura victoria. Por eso resultaba casi doloroso que él, en un día tan hermoso y tan poco propicio a cualquier dolor, se dirigiera a la casa de Bertrand con tanta seguridad: sin detenerse y sin preguntar, sabía adónde tenía que ir. Ascendió por el camino del parque, suavemente serpenteante; el hálito del bosque le envolvió, le rozó la frente, le rozó la piel del cuello y en las bocamangas y, para recibirlo plenamente, se quitó el sombrero y se desabrochó la chaqueta. Finalmente llegó a una verja del parque; apenas le sorprendió que la finca no poseyera aquel carácter suntuoso con que aparecía en sus ensueños. Y aunque no se viera en ninguna ventana a Ilona con su traje de lentejuelas, como un hermoso reflejo del bello paisaje, ella asimismo en la meta, apoyada en el alféizar de la ventana, ay, por mucho que se la echara de menos, no obstante, el castillo del sueño permanecía indeleble, indeleble la imagen de sus sueños, y era como si lo que él ahora veía materializado ante sí fuera simplemente una representación alegórica, dispuesta para un uso momentáneo y práctico, un sueño dentro del sueño. Por encima de la suave ladera de un verde profundo, envuelta en sombras, se erguía el edificio, una quinta de sólida construcción y, como si el frescor fino y juguetón de la mañana y el simbolismo todo tuvieran que cobrar asimismo vida alegórica de nuevo, se destacaba al final de la ladera un surtidor casi silencioso, y era como una bebida reflejante que se goza solo por la transparencia del agua. De la casa del portero, situada detrás de la verja y rodeada de madreselvas, surgió un hombre vestido de gris y le preguntó qué deseaba. Los botones de su chaqueta no eran el distintivo de un uniforme ni de una

librea, sino que brillaban con suavidad y frescor deslumbrantes, como si alguien los hubiera cosido exclusivamente para que hicieran juego con aquella mañana rutilante. Si la víspera había tenido un momento de desconfianza en sí mismo, un desfallecimiento momentáneo ante la duda de poder encontrar al señor presidente, ahora esta duda había desaparecido y Esch casi habría asegurado que él formaba parte de aquellos que podían entrar y salir de allí sin que nadie les preguntara nada. Así pues no se sorprendió de que el portero pasara por alto el escribir su nombre y la finalidad de la visita en un bloc, ni se le ocurrió que tal vez hubiera sido más conveniente esperar en la entrada, sino que se colocó junto a aquel hombre y caminó a su lado, y el otro le dejó hacer en silencio. Entraron en un fresco vestíbulo que estaba en semipenumbra y, mientras el hombre desaparecía por una de las muchas puertas lacadas de blanco, que se abrió y cerró suavemente tras él, Esch sintió cómo cedía la mullida alfombra bajo la presión de la suela de sus zapatos, y esperó expectante al mensajero, que al regresar le condujo a través de una serie de aposentos hasta otra puerta, frente a la cual dejó al visitante con una reverencia. Y el visitante, privado de guía repentinamente, piensa que hubiera sido más conveniente e incluso más deseable que la huida de salones hubiera proseguido, prolongándose tal vez hasta la eternidad, hasta una eternidad inasequible, precediendo al santuario más recóndito, antesala, por así decirlo, de la sala del trono, y casi está por creer que ha recorrido la inacabable serie de infinitos aposentos con excesiva rapidez y de forma indecorosa e imperceptible, puesto que se encuentra ya frente a aquel que le tiende la mano. Y aunque Esch sabía que era Bertrand, y no existía ya ninguna duda, ni aquí ni en ninguna otra parte, le pareció que este era simplemente la imagen simbólica de otro, reflejo de alguien más real y tal vez más importante, que permanecía oculto; tan simple, tan fácil, tan suavemente se había desarrollado todo. Lo miró: limpio de barba como un actor, no era actor; su rostro era juvenil y su pelo rizado y blanco. En el cuarto había muchos libros, y Esch se sentó junto al escritorio, como si estuviera en casa del médico. Le oyó hablar y su voz era amistosa como la de un médico:

—¿Qué le trae a usted aquí?

Y el soñador oyó su propia voz diciendo en voz baja:

—Lo entregaré a la policía.

—¡Oh, qué lástima! —fue la queda respuesta.

Tan queda que tampoco Esch se atrevió a levantar la voz, sino que casi para sí mismo repitió:

—Lo entregaré a la policía.

—¿Me odia usted, pues?

—Sí —mintió Esch, y se avergonzó de su mentira.

—Esto no es cierto, amigo mío, usted me aprecia.

—Un inocente está en la cárcel en lugar de usted.

Esch notó que el otro sonreía, y vio a Martin ante sí, hablando y sonriendo también. Y esta sonrisa estaba asimismo en la voz de Bertrand:

—Pero hijo, me habría tenido usted que denunciar hace mucho tiempo.

No se le podía hacer daño.

—Yo no asesino —dijo Esch torvamente.

Ahora Bertrand incluso se rió, una risa leve e inaudible, y como la mañana era tan plácida, sí, como la mañana difundía placidez, Esch fue incapaz de enfadarse, como se enfada uno, lógicamente, cuando otro se ríe de él, y olvidó que precisamente acababa de hablar de asesinato y, si el decoro lo hubiera permitido, habría coreado gustoso la leve risa de Bertrand. Se esforzó en adoptar una actitud digna, y aunque las dos ideas ya no encajaban bien entre sí o tal vez solo dentro de otra coherencia más difícil de comprender, insistió:

—No, yo no asesino, pero usted debe liberar a Martin.

Pero Bertrand, que evidentemente lo comprendía todo, pareció comprender también esto; su voz ahora más seria seguía colmada de una suave alegría, una alegría tranquilizadora:

—Pero Esch, ¿cómo se puede ser tan cobarde? ¿Acaso se necesita pretexto para cometer un asesinato?

De nuevo aparecía la palabra, aunque solo como el ligero soplo de una oscura y silenciosa mariposa. Y Esch pensó que en realidad Bertrand no debía morir, puesto que Hentjen, de todos modos, había muerto ya. Pero se produjo luego como una clara y dulce revelación: un hombre podía morir dos veces. Y Esch, extrañado de que esta idea no se le hubiera ocurrido antes, dijo:

—Pero es usted libre de huir —y propuso tentador—: A América.

Y fue como si Bertrand no le hablase a él:

—Tú sabes muy bien, querido, que yo no huyo. Hace ya mucho tiempo que esperaba este momento.

Esch experimentó repentinamente un profundo amor hacia aquel que, estando en un nivel muy superior al suyo, dialogaba con él, un simple empleado de su empresa y huérfano además, sobre la muerte como lo haría con un amigo. Esch se alegró de haber llevado bien los libros del almacén y de haber efectuado su trabajo honesta y fielmente. Y no se atrevió a decir que sabía todo cuanto se relacionaba con Bertrand ni se atrevió a pedir que Bertrand le matase, sino que se limitó a asentir comprensivamente con la cabeza. Bertrand dijo:

—Nadie está tan alto que pueda permitirse juzgar a otro, ni nadie está tan depravado que su alma inmortal no merezca respeto.

En aquel instante Esch comprendió la situación mejor que nunca, comprendió también que se había engañado a sí mismo y había engañado al mundo, pues le pareció como si cuanto Bertrand sabía de él refluyera de nuevo hacia él: nunca había creído que aquel hombre libertaría a Martin. Pero Bertrand, que conocía y era conocido, dijo, mientras hacía un ligero gesto despectivo con la mano:

—Y si yo hiciera realidad su tremenda esperanza y su irrealizable condición, Esch, ¿no tendríamos que avergonzarnos ambos? Usted, porque sería un banal e insignificante chantajista; yo, por haber sucumbido a semejante chantaje.

Aunque a Esch, siempre soñador despierto, no se le escapó nada, ni el gesto despectivo de la mano, ni el rasgo de ironía dibujado en la sonrisa y en la boca de Bertrand, no perdió la esperanza de que Bertrand, a pesar de todo, cumpliría la condición o al menos huiría: Esch confiaba en que así fuera, porque de pronto apareció el temor de que, con la segunda muerte del señor Hentjen, pudiera morir también el deseo por mamá Hentjen. Pero esta era una cuestión de su vida privada, y hacer depender de ella el destino de Bertrand no le parecía menos indigno que si le hubiera extorsionado dinero, y además tampoco encajaba con la pureza de la mañana. Por eso dijo:

—No hay otra salida… Yo tengo que denunciarle a usted.

—Todo el mundo ha de realizar sus sueños, tanto el perverso como el santo —respondió Bertrand—. De no hacerlo, no se puede participar en la libertad.

Esch no le comprendió del todo y para asegurarse dijo:

—Tengo que denunciarle. Si no lo hago, cada vez será peor.

—Sí, querido, si no lo hace cada vez será peor, y queremos intentar evitarlo. Yo tengo, de los dos, la parte más fácil; me basta con huir. El forastero nunca sufre, está desligado; solo sufre aquel que permanece atado.

Esch creyó ver de nuevo el gesto irónico en la boca de Bertrand: envuelto en esa fría maraña de lejanía corruptora, Harry Köhler tenía que hundirse dolorosamente y, sin embargo, Esch no podía enfadarse con el causante de tal desdicha. Hubiera preferido dar por terminada la cuestión, haciendo él también un gesto despectivo con la mano, pero, casi como una continuación de las palabras de Bertrand, dijo:

—Si no hubiera expiación, no existirían ni el ayer, ni el hoy, ni el mañana.

—Oh, Esch, haces que se me oprima el corazón. Esperas demasiado. Todavía no ha sido calculado el tiempo posterior a la muerte: en su comienzo siempre estuvo el nacimiento.

Esch tenía también el corazón oprimido. Esperaba que aquel hombre diera la orden de izar bandera negra en las almenas y pensó: Tiene que dejar sitio para aquel después del cual se contará el tiempo. Pero Bertrand no parecía entristecerse por todo aquello, pues dijo en tono superficial, igual que si hiciera una observación al margen:

—Son muchos los que han de morir, muchos han de ser sacrificados, a fin de dejar sitio al redentor, al conocedor de todo, el portador del amor. Y solo su muerte en sacrificio liberará al mundo retornándolo al estado de la nueva inocencia. Pero antes tiene que venir el Anticristo, el insensato, el sin sueños. Primero hay que dejar el mundo sin aire, vaciarlo como si se pusiera bajo una campana neumática… la nada.

Esto era evidente, como todo lo que Bertrand decía, tan evidente y familiar que la osadía de imitar su irónica expresión se convertía casi en una obligación, casi en una muestra de acuerdo:

—Sí, hay que imponer el orden, a fin de poder comenzar desde el principio.

En cuanto lo hubo dicho, sintió vergüenza; se avergonzó del tono en que había hablado y de la expresión sarcástica de su rostro; temía que Bertrand se riera otra vez de él, pues ante Bertrand se sentía totalmente desnudo, y le agradeció mucho que se limitara a puntualizar en voz baja:

—Asesinato y contraasesinato es lo que constituye este orden, Esch… El orden de la máquina.

Esch pensó: Si él me retuviera aquí, eso sería orden; todo se olvidaría y los días transcurrirían en paz y armonía; pero él me rechaza. Y él tenía que irse si Ilona iba a venir. Por eso dijo:

—Martin se ha sacrificado y nadie le ha liberado.

La mano de Bertrand se movió en un ligero gesto de desprecio y desesperanza.

—Nadie ve al otro en la oscuridad, Esch, y la claridad que fluye y refluye es solo un sueño. Tú sabes que yo no puedo retenerte conmigo, por más que temas la soledad. También yo me he de limitar a proseguir mis negocios.

Era lógico que a Esch esto le apesadumbrase, y dijo:

—Clavado en la cruz.

Entonces Bertrand volvió a sonreír, y Esch se sintió tan rechazado por él que casi le hubiera deseado la muerte, si aquella sonrisa no hubiera sido tan amistosa, amistosa y callada como el discurso que todo lo revelaba:

—Sí, Esch, clavado en la cruz. Y atravesado por una lanza en la última soledad y confortado con vinagre. Solo entonces pueden penetrar las tinieblas en las que el mundo debe sumergirse para que renazcan la luz y la inocencia, aquellas tinieblas en las que ningún ser humano halla el camino del otro… Y aunque caminemos juntos, no nos oímos y nos olvidamos los unos de los otros, como tú también, mi querido y último amigo, olvidarás lo que te estoy diciendo, lo olvidarás como se olvida un sueño.

Pulsó un botón y dio algunas órdenes. Luego fueron al hermoso jardín que se extendía hasta el infinito, y Bertrand le enseñó sus flores y sus caballos. Por entre las flores revoloteaban calladas mariposas oscuras y los caballos no relinchaban. Bertrand andaba con paso elástico, puesto que caminaba a través de sus dominios, aunque Esch tenía de vez en cuando la impresión de que aquel hombre de pies ligeros andaba con muletas, pues en lo alto del cielo había un eclipse solar. Al cabo de un rato se sentaron juntos a la mesa, engalanada con objetos de plata, con vino y frutas, y eran como dos amigos que lo saben todo el uno del otro. En cuanto terminaron de comer, Esch supo que se acercaba el momento de la despedida, puesto que la noche podía llegar de improviso. Bertrand le acompañó hasta los escalones que descendían al jardín, y allí estaba esperando el gran automóvil rojo con los cojines de cuero también rojo, todavía calientes del sol del mediodía. Y cuando se rozaron sus dedos en la despedida, Esch experimentó un fuerte impulso de inclinarse y besar la mano de Bertrand. Pero el conductor del automóvil tocó el claxon con violencia y el visitante tuvo que subir rápidamente al vehículo. Apenas se puso este en movimiento, se levantó un viento tan fuerte y cálido que pareció borrar la casa y el jardín, y el viento no cesó hasta Müllheim, donde un tren iluminado esperaba resoplando al viajero. Era el primer viaje que Esch hacía en automóvil y resultó muy agradable.

> Grande es la angustia de aquel que despierta. Regresa con justificaciones mínimas y teme la fuerza de su sueño, sueño que no se ha convertido tal vez en acción, pero sí en un nuevo saber. El expulsado del sueño vaga en el sueño. Y de nada le sirve llevar una postal en el bolsillo para poder contemplarla cuando quiera; ante el tribunal sigue siendo un testigo falso.

El ser humano, con frecuencia, no se da cuenta de que su añoranza ha cambiado de fisonomía en el curso de unas horas. Tal vez lo que el viajero común pase por alto sean simplemente diferencias sutiles, meros matices, mientras la añoranza de la patria se ha ido transformando para él sin que lo advirtiera en nostalgia de la tierra prometida y, aunque en su corazón reine una confusa zozobra, por temor a la noche de la patria que espera, sus ojos están llenos de una claridad invisible, una claridad que proviene de alguna parte, no se sabe de cuál, si bien se presiente que es la claridad del otro lado del Océano, del país donde las oscuras brumas se disipan: pero en cuanto se levanta la niebla, se hacen visibles las extendidas y despejadas hileras de los campos, así como las praderas verdes cubiertas suavemente de arbustos, un país que encubre arropada una mañana tan eterna que el angustiado empieza a olvidarse de las mujeres. Es un país casi despoblado y los escasos colonos que lo habitan son extranjeros. No mantienen ningún tipo de relación entre sí, cada uno vive solitario en su castillo. Se ocupan de sus negocios, cultivan los campos, siembran y escardan. El brazo de la justicia no puede alcanzarles, porque no necesitan ni derecho ni leyes. Viajan en sus automóviles por las estepas y por zonas vírgenes que aún no han sido jamás cruzadas por carreteras, y su única guía es su irrealizable añoranza. Incluso cuando los colonos se han establecido, se sienten extranjeros; su añoranza es un dolor de lejanía, de una lejanía cuya luminosidad va aumentando sin llegar a ser jamás alcanzable. Y lo más sorprendente es que son hombres occidentales, es decir, unos hombres cuya mirada está vuelta hacia el ocaso, como si allá no se irguiera la noche sino la puerta de la luz. No se sabe si buscan esa luminosidad con tanto afán porque piensan con agudeza y realismo o porque temen la oscuridad. Solo se sabe que se instalan en los lugares donde hay poco bosque o que lo talan para convertirlo en un parque rebosante de luz; pues, aunque les gusta el frescor de la fronda, dicen que deben preservar a sus hijos de su terrible oscuridad. Sea esto cierto o no, indica al menos que los colonos no poseen aquel temperamento arisco con que uno se imagina a los colonos y pioneros, sino que se parecen a las mujeres, y su nostalgia corresponde a la nostalgia que experimentan las mujeres, nostalgia que aparentemente se refiere al hombre amado, pero que en realidad afecta a la tierra prometida adonde él debe conducirlas sacándolas de las tinieblas. Pero uno ha de ser precavido con tales manifestaciones, porque los colonos se ofenden con facilidad y entonces se encierran aún más en su soledad. En cambio en las estepas, en los campos cubiertos de hierba, coronados por infinitas colinas y regados por frescos ríos, zonas que ellos prefieren, están alegres, si bien son demasiado tímidos como para ponerse a cantar. Así es la vida de los colonos, vuelta de espaldas al dolor, vida que buscan al otro lado del océano. Mueren fácilmente, juvenilmente, aunque sus cabellos ya sean grises, pues su nostalgia es una constante despedida. Son orgullosos como lo era Moisés a la vista de la tierra prometida, él solo dentro de la añoranza de Dios, él solo excluido. Y con frecuencia se observa en sus manos el mismo gesto de desesperanza, teñido de cierto desprecio, que hiciera Moisés en la montaña. Pues la patria del pueblo se extiende irrecuperable detrás de ellos, frente a ellos la lejanía inalcanzable, y el hombre, cuya nostalgia ha cambiado sin que él mismo lo sepa, se siente a veces como quien ha aturdido sus males, pero sin poder nunca olvidarlos del todo. Esperanza inútil. Pues ¿quién podría diferenciar el extravío del huérfano del avance hacia delante por los campos dichosos? Aunque disminuya el dolor por lo irreparable, al introducirse más y más en la tierra prometida, aunque muchas cosas se disuelvan y se pierdan en la luminosidad creciente, y el dolor esté cada vez más desligado de todo, sea más luminoso, incluso tal vez invisible, a pesar de ello no desaparece por completo, como no desaparece la nostalgia del hombre, en cuyo sonambulismo expira el mundo, desmoronándose en el recuerdo de la noche de su mujer, nostálgica y maternal, para ser al fin solo un aliento doloroso del pasado. Vana esperanza, altanería que con frecuencia carece de fundamento. Por eso muchos colonos, aunque parezcan alegres y serenos, tienen remordimientos y están más dispuestos a la expiación que

muchos otros hombres más pecadores que ellos. Ciertamente no resulta increíble que incluso haya algunos que no puedan seguir soportando la claridad y la armonía a las que se han entregado y, aun pudiendo uno creer que su incoercible dolor de lejanía ha aumentado tanto que necesariamente tendrá que volver al polo opuesto o quizá al origen, por eso precisamente no es menos increíble que uno pueda ver colonos que sollozan tapándose la cara con las manos, como si sufrieran añoranza de la patria.

Así pues, Esch, a medida que se acercaba a la ciudad de Mannheim en aquella mañana gris y neblinosa, iba sumergiéndose en una angustia más y más dolorosa, y apenas sabía ya si el tren le llevaba directamente a la taberna de Colonia o si mamá Hentjen, a fin de concebir un hijo de él, le esperaría con impaciencia en Mannheim. Le decepcionó encontrar simplemente una carta, carta que él había esperado, pero que hubiera preferido no leer. Y más todavía al pensar que la cochina carta había sido escrita debajo del retrato del señor Hentjen. Tal vez por esta razón, o debido quizá también a su angustia, la mano de Esch temblaba cuando, pese a todo, abrió la carta.

Apenas se había fijado en Erna, ni tampoco había concedido ninguna atención a su expresión ofendida; se fue inmediatamente a la ciudad, pues sabía que debía presentar denuncia en la jefatura de policía. Pero, por una extraña casualidad, se encontró primero frente al comercio de Lohberg; le saludó, y ahora se planteó la cuestión de si debía regresar al puerto. Pero no le apetecía, y hubiera preferido dirigirse a la cárcel, aunque sabía perfectamente que no dejaban entrar más que por las tardes. Remotamente empezó a aparecer la soledad y acabó por hallarse ante el monumento dedicado a Schiller, y habría estado contento si hubiera encontrado junto a él la torre Eiffel y la estatua de la libertad. Tal vez era simplemente la consecuencia de la diferencia de dimensiones: el monumento, en su tamaño natural, no le decía nada, ahora era completamente incapaz de imaginar siquiera el local de mamá Hentjen. De este modo dejó pasar ocioso la mañana, luchando con su memoria; efectivamente él quería presentar una denuncia en la policía, pero no sabía cómo formular el contenido. Por fin, con una sensación de inmenso alivio, abandonó el proyecto, cuando se le ocurrió que la policía de Mannheim, que había metido en la cárcel a Martin, no era digna de recibir tal denuncia, mientras que él, de todos modos, seguía debiendo a Colonia un sustituto por Nentwig. Se enfureció: podía habérsele ocurrido antes, pero ahora todo estaba claro, y almorzó con buen apetito en compañía de Lohberg.

Después se dirigió a la penitenciaría. De nuevo el día volvía a ser caluroso, de nuevo se encontró sentado en el locutorio —¿había salido uno nunca de él?—, todo permanecía exactamente igual y nada mediaba entre las dos visitas: de nuevo entró Martin acompañado del carcelero, de nuevo sintió Esch el torturante vacío en su cabeza, de nuevo resultó inexplicable el porqué estaba él sentado en aquella sala de un edificio estatal, inexplicable, pese a que ocurría para un determinado y largamente premeditado fin. Por suerte notó en el bolsillo los cigarrillos que esta vez, desde luego, entregaría con disimulo a Martin, para que al menos la visita saldara una vieja cuenta pendiente. Pero esto era un pretexto, sí, un pretexto, pensó Esch, y luego pensó: quien no tiene cabeza ha de tener pies. Todo resultaba molesto, y cuando estuvieron sentados los tres en torno a la mesa, le irritó especialmente la irónica amabilidad de Martin… le advertía de algo que él se negaba a admitir.

—¿Ya estás de vuelta de la cura, August? Tienes realmente muy buen aspecto. ¿Has visto a todos tus antiguos conocidos?

Esch no mintió al decir:

—No he visto a nadie.

—¡Vaya! ¿No estuviste, pues, en Badenweiler?

Esch no pudo responder.

—Esch, ¿has cometido alguna tontería?

Esch continuó callado y Martin se puso serio:

—Si has hecho algo, tú y yo hemos terminado.

Esch dijo:

—Todo es muy extraño. ¿Qué podía hacer yo?

A lo que Martin respondió:

—¡Pues hay algo que no marcha! ¿Tienes la conciencia tranquila?

—Sí, tengo la conciencia tranquila.

Martin le seguía observando inquisitivamente, y Esch se acordó forzosamente de aquel día en que Martin le siguió por la calle como si quisiera agredirle por la espalda con su muleta. Pero Martin recobró su amabilidad y preguntó:

—¿Y qué haces todavía en Mannheim?

—Lohberg se va a casar con Erna Korn.

—Ah, Lohberg… Me acuerdo de él, el comerciante de tabacos. ¿Y por eso te quedas aquí?

La mirada de Martin volvía a ser desconfiada.

—De todos modos me marcharé hoy… A lo más tardar, mañana.

—¿Y qué piensas hacer?

Esch hubiera querido estar lo más lejos posible.

—Me iré a América —dijo.

Martin sonrió con aquella expresión de niño envejecido:

—Sí, sí, tienes esta idea desde hace tiempo… ¿O es que ahora hay algún motivo especial que te impulse a irte?

No, simplemente ahora creía tener allí buenas perspectivas.

—Bueno, Esch, espero volver a verte antes. Es preferible tener allí buenas perspectivas a que algo te obligara a irte de aquí… Pero si fuera por alguna otra razón ¡no me verías nunca más, Esch!

Estas últimas palabras sonaron como una amenaza, y en la calurosa y poco ventilada sala cayó de nuevo el silencio sobre los tres hombres sentados en torno a la mesa manchada de tinta. Esch se puso de pie y dijo que debía darse prisa si quería alcanzar el tren, y cuando Martin, al despedirse, le miró nuevamente inquisidor y desconfiado, Esch le deslizó los cigarrillos en la mano, mientras el guardián uniformado fingía no verlo, o realmente no lo veía. Después Martin se hizo conducir otra vez hacia su celda.

Camino de la ciudad, Esch sentía resonar en sus oídos la amenaza de Martin, y tal vez dicha amenaza se acababa ya de realizar, puesto que de repente no pudo continuar imaginándose a Martin, ni su forma de cojear, ni su sonrisa, ni que el lisiado pudiera entrar nunca más en la taberna. Se había convertido en un extraño. Esch caminaba a grandes e irregulares pasos, como si tuviera que agrandar lo más rápidamente posible la distancia entre él y la cárcel, la distancia existente entre él y todo cuanto quedaba a sus espaldas. No, aquel tipo no le seguiría nunca más para clavarle la muleta por la espalda; ni el uno perseguirá al otro ni él podría alejarlo de sí; cada cual está condenado a seguir su propio camino solitario, ajeno a toda comunicación con los demás: se trata de desligarse de la enmarañada red del pasado para evitar el sufrimiento. Solo es necesario caminar lo suficientemente aprisa. La amenaza de Martin iba perdiendo curiosamente consistencia, era como una humilde copia terrenal de un estado de cosas más elevado en el que uno tomaba parte desde hacía mucho tiempo. Y aunque uno dejase atrás a Martin, aunque uno, por así decirlo, sacrificara a Martin, esto era también una reproducción terrenal de un holocausto más elevado, reproducción necesaria para abolir definitivamente el pasado. Ciertamente las calles de Mannheim continuaban siendo familiares, pero conducían a lo desconocido, a la libertad; se avanzaba a un nivel superior y, cuando llegara al día siguiente a Colonia, ya no estaría sometido a la ciudad ni a su imagen, la encontraría dócil y humilde, obediente a todos los cambios. Esch hizo un gesto despectivo con la mano y logró al mismo tiempo esbozar una mueca de ironía.

Estaba tan absorto en sus pensamientos que cruzó la puerta de la vivienda de Korn sin darse cuenta; hasta que llegó a la puerta de la buhardilla, no notó que había subido demasiado y tuvo que descender un piso. Y se asustó cuando le abrió la señorita Erna. Se había olvidado completamente de ella y ahora ella estaba allí, miraba por la puerta entreabierta, lucía su sonrisa amarilla y reclamaba su parte. Era como la encarnación del demonio del pasado que bloqueaba el portal de la nostalgia, careta de lo terrenal, más invencible y sarcástica que nunca, exigiendo que uno descendiera eternamente hasta la maraña de lo que había sido. Y no representaba ninguna ayuda el tener la conciencia tranquila, no servía de nada ser libre de, en todo momento, proseguir el viaje hacia Colonia y hacia América; durante un instante, lo que dura un latido de corazón, pareció incluso como si Martin le hubiera atrapado, como si fuera la venganza de Martin la que le rebajase y le empujase hacia la señorita Erna. La señorita Erna, en cambio, parecía saber que no había escapatoria para él, pues sonreía con el mismo aire de suficiencia con que sonreía Martin, como si poseyera un conocimiento secreto de una atadura terrenal confusa todavía, pero amenazadora e inevitable, y de máxima importancia. Él observó inquisitivamente el rostro de la señorita Erna: era el rostro marchito de un Anticristo y no contenía respuesta alguna. «¿Cuándo va a venir Lohberg?» Esch formuló la pregunta sin ningún preámbulo, como con la vaga esperanza de hallar en ello una solución; y cuando la señorita Erna dio a entender con astucia que intencionadamente no había avisado a su prometido, esto le pareció a Esch un privilegio excitante, pero, al mismo tiempo, molesto. Sin mirar siquiera la expresión de enfado de la señorita Erna, salió de la casa y se fue a ver a Lohberg para invitarle a cenar.

Y fue realmente tranquilizador encontrarse con aquel idiota, tan tranquilizador que Esch se lo llevó enseguida y no solo compró toda clase de manjares, sino también dos ramos de flores, y le puso a Lohberg uno en la mano. No es de extrañar que la señorita Erna, al verlos, juntara las manos y exclamara: «¡Eso sí que son dos caballeros!». Esch repuso muy ufano: «La fiesta de despedida», y, mientras ella preparaba la mesa, se sentó en el sofá junto a su amigo Lohberg y cantó «Tengo que dejar la pequeña ciudad», lo que le valió por parte de la señorita Erna una serie de miradas tristes y desaprobadoras. Sí, tal vez fuera realmente una fiesta de despedida, una fiesta de ruptura con aquella comunidad terrenal, y le hubiera gustado prohibir a Erna que colocara en la mesa un cubierto para Ilona. Pues Ilona debería ser igualmente liberada y encontrarse ya en la meta. Y este deseo era tan poderoso que Esch esperó con absoluta seriedad que Ilona no aparecería, que no aparecería nunca más. Y por añadidura le producía cierto regocijo la decepción de Korn.

Korn, en efecto, se sintió decepcionado; su decepción se manifestaba sin más en obscenas imprecaciones

contra el prototipo de mujer húngara, así como en la apremiante impaciencia con que exigía la comida. Al propio tiempo movía su ancha mole con extraña agilidad por toda la habitación; se volvía hacia la botella de licor, se volvía hacia la mesa de la que cogía con sus gordos dedos algún trozo de salchicha, y como Erna se lo prohibiera, se volvió hacia Lohberg y lo amenazó con el puño para que se levantara del sofá, que reclamaba para sí como su sitio habitual. El ruido que causaba aquel hombre era extraordinario; su cuerpo y su voz llenaban la estancia cada vez más, la llenaban hasta los bordes; todo lo terrenal y lo carnal de la conducta de Korn, hambrienta y desmesurada, fluía por la habitación y salía incluso fuera de ella amenazando con llenar el mundo; brotaban lo pasado y lo inmutable empujando a un lado todo lo demás y ahogando la esperanza; la oscuridad empezaba a reinar en el elevado e iluminado escenario; tal vez ni siquiera existía. «Y bien, Lohberg, ¿dónde está ahora vuestro reino de la redención?», gritó Esch, como si con ello pudiera acallar su espanto, y gritó de rabia, porque ni Lohberg ni nadie podía darle una respuesta: ¿por qué debía descender Ilona hasta entrar en contacto con lo terrenal y muerto? Pero Korn, sentado sobre sus anchas posaderas, ordenó con voz estentórea: «¡Traed comida!». «¡No!», protestó Esch a gritos, «¡hay que esperar a que llegue Ilona!» Pues, aunque casi tenía miedo de volver a ver a Ilona, ahora todo estaba en entredicho y de repente Esch deseó con impaciencia que Ilona llegara, en cierto modo como piedra de toque de la verdad.

Ilona entró. Apenas se fijó en los presentes, sino que, obedeciendo a una seña de Korn, que masticaba en silencio, se sentó a su lado en el sofá y, cumpliendo también una silenciosa orden, le pasó con desgana su suave brazo por encima del hombro. Por lo demás, se dedicó a mirar los sabrosos manjares que le darían de comer. Erna, que lo veía todo, dijo: «Si yo fuera tú, Ilona, apartaría la mano de Balthasar mientras estuviéramos comiendo». Sus palabras cayeron en el vacío, pues Ilona, evidentemente, aún no comprendía bien el alemán y, además, desconocía los sacrificios que por ella se habían hecho. Desposeída de todo idioma, apenas si podía llamársela comensal en la mesa de los atados a la carne, antes bien una visitante en la cárcel de lo terrenal o una prisionera voluntaria. Y Erna, que hoy parecía saber muchas cosas, no siguió mencionando asuntos terrenales, y fue como un testimonio de una comprensión remota el que tomara el ramo de flores de la mesa y lo sostuviera bajo la nariz de Ilona: «Huele, Ilona», le dijo, e Ilona dijo: «Sí, gracias», y las palabras sonaron como procedentes de una lejanía a la que aquel Korn mastiqueante nunca podría llegar, como si vinieran de un estrato superior al que ella podría acceder si uno se mantenía en el sacrificio. Esch se animaba con facilidad. Cada cual debe realizar sus sueños, los perversos y los santos por igual: entonces participará de la libertad. Y por más que fuera una lástima el que aquel dechado de virtudes se llevase a Erna y el que Ilona jamás pudiera presentir que se iba a echar la última raya de una cuenta, fue, no obstante, una conclusión y un cambio, una prueba testimonial y un nuevo conocimiento, que Esch se levantara y bebiera a la salud del grupo y dijera unas breves palabras de felicitación para los novios; todos se sorprendieron, excepto Ilona, a quien, en realidad, iba dirigido. Pero como, de suyo, respondía al deseo de todos, se sintieron agradecidos, y Lohberg le estrechó varias veces las manos con los ojos húmedos. Después, obedeciendo una orden suya, los novios se dieron el beso de prometidos.

Pese a todo, a Esch no le pareció definitivo cuanto acababa de suceder y, cuando todo terminó y Korn se había retirado ya en compañía de Ilona, y la señorita Erna se disponía a ponerse las agujas del sombrero para ir con Esch a acompañar hasta su casa a su prometido, Esch se opuso: no, no le parecía correcto que él, un hombre soltero, pasara la noche en casa de la novia de Lohberg; él estaría dispuesto a hospedarse hoy en casa del señor Lohberg o a cambiar con él de habitación, posibilidad esta última que debían tener en cuenta ya que, como recién prometidos, tendrían muchas cosas que decirse. Y con estas palabras los empujó a los dos dentro de la habitación de Erna, y él se fue a la suya.

De este modo terminó el día de su primera liberación y empezó la primera noche de su extraordinaria y desagradable renuncia.

EL INSOMNE

> Aquel que sin poder conciliar el sueño apaga con las blandas y húmedas yemas de los dedos la vela que tiene junto a su cama y espera en su cuarto, en el que se está fresco ahora, el sueño reparador, vive hacia la muerte a cada latido de su corazón, pues cuanto más insólitamente se ha expandido el frescor por la habitación en torno a él tanto más ardiente y premioso es el tiempo en el interior de su cerebro, tan premioso que principio y final, origen y muerte, ayer y mañana se derrumban y funden en un solitario y único ahora y lo llenan hasta el borde y casi lo hacen estallar.

Esch se preguntó por un instante si Lohberg, a fin de cuentas, vendría a buscarle para ir juntos a su casa. Pero con una mueca de ironía decidió que podía irse a dormir y, sonriendo aún socarronamente, empezó a desnudarse. A la luz de la vela releyó la carta de mamá Hentjen; las explicaciones referentes a la taberna eran excesivamente largas y también muy aburridas; había, en cambio, un párrafo que le producía especial alegría: «Y no olvides, mi querido August, que tú eres y serás mi único amor en este mundo, sin el cual yo no podría vivir, y por tanto habré de llevarte conmigo, querido August, hasta la fría tumba». Sí, le alegraba leer esto, y ahora, a causa de mamá Hentjen, se sintió todavía más satisfecho de haber enviado y entregado Lohberg a Erna. Luego se humedeció las yemas de los dedos, apagó la vela y se tendió cuan largo era.

Una noche de insomnio comienza con pensamientos banales; es algo parecido a lo que ocurre con un prestidigitador, que primero ejecuta una serie de ejercicios fáciles, antes de pasar a otros que quitan el aliento. Envuelto en la oscuridad, Esch no pudo evitar una nueva sonrisa socarrona ante la idea de que Lohberg se deslizaría por debajo de las sábanas hasta Erna y de que esta le recibiría con su risita de conejo, y se alegró de no tener que estar celoso de aquel campeón de la virtud. Evidentemente su deseo de acostarse con Erna había desaparecido ahora por sí solo, y estaba muy bien que así fuera. Y en realidad él piensa en lo, que ocurre en la otra habitación solo para constatar que le deja totalmente indiferente; no le produce ni frío ni calor que Erna acaricie con sus manos el pobre cuerpo de aquel idiota, ni que ella soporte junto a sí a un tal engendro, y le da absolutamente igual qué tipo de impresiones o imágenes fálicas —Esch empleó en realidad otra expresión— pudiera ella barajar en su mente. Era tan simple imaginarse todo esto, que casi parecía no tener consistencia, y, además, tratándose del casto José, uno no estaba ni siquiera seguro de que las cosas ocurrieran realmente de este modo. ¡Qué fácil sería vivir si estas mismas cosas le dejaran indiferente cuando se trataba de mamá Hentjen…! Pero solo el roce de este pensamiento resultaba tan doloroso que Esch se estremeció, de modo parecido a como se estremecía mamá Hentjen en determinadas ocasiones. Y gustosamente habría vuelto a pensar en Erna, si algo no se hubiera interpuesto en el camino de sus pensamientos, algo invisible de lo, cual él únicamente sabe que es lo amenazador, lo inevitable de la tarde precedente. Por eso prefiere pensar en Ilona, pues en este caso el que se establezca el orden depende exclusivamente de que él extirpe de su memoria el recuerdo de los cuchillos silbantes. Quiere pensar en ello como ejercicio previo a otras tareas mucho más difíciles, pero no lo consigue. Cuando finalmente se imagina, en contra de su voluntad y con rabia, que ella se está abandonando, lánguida y suave, a Korn, ese pedazo de animal muerto, sin consideración hacia sí misma, de la misma suerte que permanece erguida y sonriente entre los cuchillos esperando que uno le dé en el corazón, oh, entonces descubre repentinamente la solución de todo el enigma: es un suicidio lo que ella realiza de esta manera tan extrañamente complicada y femenina, suicidio que la arrastra hasta el contacto con lo terrenal. ¡De eso tiene que ser liberada! ¡Solución del problema, que constituye un nuevo problema! En verdad, si aquella amenaza no cerrase el camino, uno apartaría sencillamente a Ilona a un lado, se acercaría a Erna, cogería a Lohberg por el cuello de la camisa y lo lanzaría sin contemplaciones por el aire. Después de esto uno podría dormir tranquilo y sin pesadillas. Pero en este preciso momento en que está imaginando cuán apacible sería el mundo y en que ha vuelto a encontrar en sí mismo el más elemental deseo de poseer una mujer, al insomne se le ocurre repentinamente una idea que es, a un tiempo, un poco divertida y un poco terrible: él no podía volver a Erna, porque ahora ya no quedaría claro quién era el padre del niño. ¡Este era el ligamen inexplicable, profundo y terrenal! ¡Este era el muro amenazador que hoy le había hecho retroceder asustado ante Erna! La cuenta podía ser exacta; pues un hombre se había marchado para dejar sitio a otro, tras el cual el tiempo empieza a contar, y probablemente era también justo que el padre de un redentor fuera un casto José. El insomne intenta de nuevo esbozar su mueca irónica, pero ahora ya no lo consigue; sus párpados están demasiado cerrados y nadie puede reír en la oscuridad. Porque la noche es el tiempo de la libertad y la risa es la venganza del esclavo. ¡Oh, sí! Era justo que él yaciera ahora en su cama, insomne y expectante, con una excitación fría y extraña que ya no era fruto del deseo; yacía como un muerto aparente en su tumba, puesto que el otro yacía insomne y rígido en la suya. No obstante, ¿cómo podía uno admitir que aquel otro hubiera sido sacrificado para que germinara una nueva vida en el receptáculo mezquino y terrenal que se llamaba señorita Erna? El insomne profiere maldiciones como suelen hacer todos los insomnes, pero mientras maldice y blasfema, se le ocurre que, no obstante, aquello no concordaba, si la mágica hora de la muerte ha de coincidir con la hora de la procreación. No es posible estar al mismo tiempo en Badenweiler y en Mannheim; había sacado una conclusión precipitada y prematura, pues todo era sin lugar a dudas más complicado y más digno.

La habitación, sumida en la oscuridad, estaba llena de frescor. Esch, hombre de comportamiento impetuoso, yacía inmóvil en la cama, su corazón martilleaba el tiempo hasta reducirlo a una nada sutil, y no veía ningún motivo por el cual debiera uno aplazar la muerte hacia un futuro que, de todos modos, era ya presente. Al que está desvelado puede parecerle esto ilógico, pero es porque olvida que él mismo, la mayoría de las veces, se encuentra en una especie de letargo y que únicamente en estado de insomnio, expectante, se piensa con lógica. El insomne mantiene los ojos cerrados como si no quisiera ver las frías tinieblas del nicho en que yace, como si temiera que el insomnio pudiera transformarse en un vulgar estar despierto ante las cortinas que cuelgan ante la ventana como faldas de mujer, ante todos los objetos que se liberarían de las tinieblas en cuanto él abriera los ojos. Pero él quiere permanecer insomne y no despierto, de lo contrario no podría yacer aquí en la tumba, separado del mundo y bajo amparo, junto a mamá Hentjen, lleno de deseo, pero de un deseo que ha dejado de ser carnal: sí, le habían robado el deseo y también esto era justo. Unido a la muerte, piensa el insomne, aparentemente asesinado, sí, unido a la muerte, pensamiento que, en realidad, sería tranquilizador si uno no tuviera forzosamente que pensar en Erna y en Lohberg, los cuales ahora también estarían unidos en la muerte de alguna manera. ¡Pero de qué manera! El insomne ya no tiene ganas de hacer chistes cínicos, él quiere, por así decirlo, dejar que actúe sobre él el contenido metafísico de los acontecimientos y quiere valorar en su justa medida la enorme, extraordinaria distancia que separa el lugar

donde se encuentra de las restantes habitaciones de la casa, quiere reflexionar con toda seriedad sobre la alcanzable comunidad del mundo, sobre la realización del sueño que debe conducir a la plenitud; y como no comprende nada de todo esto, se entristece y se pone de mal humor, se enfurece y solo piensa en cómo es posible que pueda surgir lo vivo de lo muerto. El insomne acaricia con la mano su pelo corto y tieso; le queda en la mano una sensación de picazón y de frescura; es como un experimento peligroso, que no habrá de repetir.

Y mientras va progresando de este modo en ejercicios cada vez más difíciles y más dignos, va en aumento su cólera, y tal vez sea la cólera de un deseo que ha perdido su fuerza, de un deseo sin apetencias. Ilona comete un suicidio de manera extrañamente complicada y femenina, absorbiendo noche tras noche un fragmento de muerte, de suerte que el rostro de Ilona está hinchado como si la hubiera rozado ya la putrefacción. Y cada noche, al irse grabando en ella las imágenes lascivas, ha de aumentar forzosamente esa hinchazón. ¡Era por eso que hoy había tenido tanto miedo de ver a Ilona! Todo el saber del insomne se convierte en lúcido sueño anticipado de la muerte, y él advierte que mamá Hentjen está ya muerta, que ella, la muerta, no puede tener un hijo de él, que ella, precisamente por eso, en lugar de venir a Mannheim, solo había podido escribir una carta, una carta escrita debajo del retrato de aquel por quien se había dejado matar, porque ella había consentido, exactamente igual que Ilona permitía que la matara el bestia de Korn. También las mejillas de mamá Hentjen están carcomidas, el tiempo y la agonía de la muerte se reflejan en su rostro y el amor de sus noches está muerto, está muerto como la pianola que exhala un runruneo metálico en cuanto uno lo manipula. Y Esch se enfurece cada vez más.

El insomne ignora que su cama se encuentra en un lugar determinado, dentro de una casa real de una calle concreta, y rechaza todo cuanto pueda hacérselo recordar. Es sabido que los insomnes se encolerizan con facilidad por cualquier cosa; el ruido de las ruedas de un tranvía solitario por la calle basta para ponerles furiosos. ¡Cuánto más violento será por consiguiente su enfado ante una contradicción, si esta es tan grande y terrible que apenas puede compararse a un error de contabilidad! El insomne acosa con febril celeridad sus propios pensamientos, para encontrar un sentido al interrogante que se cierne sobre él procedente de alguna parte, de muy lejos, de América tal vez. Siente que en su cabeza existe una región que es América, una región que es simplemente el sitio del futuro en su cerebro y que, no obstante, no puede existir, mientras el pasado continúe precipitándose desenfrenadamente en el futuro, el mundo de la nada en el mundo nuevo. Él mismo es arrastrado por este cataclismo de destrucción, pero no en solitario, sino que cuantos le rodean son barridos juntamente con él por el glacial huracán, y todos siguen a aquel que se ha arrojado el primero a esta tempestad, aniquilados a fin de que el tiempo vuelva a ser tiempo. En este momento no existía el tiempo, solo un espacio extraordinariamente grande: el insomne, el expectante, oye todas las agonías, y aunque mantiene fuertemente cerrados los párpados para no ver, sabe que la muerte es siempre un asesinato.

Ahora volvía de nuevo la palabra, pero no revoloteando con suavidad como una mariposa, sino chirriando como un tranvía que circula de noche por la calle; la palabra «asesino» estaba ahí y gritaba. El muerto transmite la muerte. Nadie tiene derecho a sobrevivir. Como si la muerte fuera un niño, mamá Hentjen lo había recibido del difunto sastre, e Ilona la recibe de Korn. Tal vez Korn sea también un muerto; está cebado como mamá Hentjen y no sabe nada de la redención. Y si no está muerto, morirá —pequeña esperanza que le hace feliz—, morirá como el sastre, después de haber perpetrado el asesinato. Asesinato y contraasesinato, rasgo tras rasgo, el pasado y el futuro se precipitan mezclados hacia el seno del instante mortal que es el presente. Esto exige una reflexión muy profunda y seria, pues de lo contrario se infiltraría inmediatamente un error de contabilidad. ¡Qué difícil es, por encima de toda medida, distinguir un sacrificio de un asesinato! ¿Tendrá que destruirse todo, antes de que el mundo pueda ser redimido y conducido al estado de inocencia? ¿Tendrá que estallar de nuevo el diluvio universal? ¿No sería suficiente que se sacrificara uno solo, que uno solo dejara sitio? El insomne vive todavía, aunque, como todos los que padecen insomnio, está aparentemente muerto; Ilona vive aún, pese a que ha rozado ya la muerte; solo uno lleva sobre sí el peso del sacrificio en aras de una nueva vida y del orden que hay que restablecer en un mundo en el que no se permitirá lanzar cuchillos. El sacrificio no podía continuar constando como no ocurrido. Y como en el estado de insomne expectación se descubren todos los conocimientos abstractos y de validez universal, Esch llegó a la siguiente conclusión: los muertos son los asesinos de las mujeres. Pero él no estaba muerto y a él le correspondía salvar a Ilona.

De nuevo siente en su interior un imperioso deseo de recibir la muerte de manos de mamá Hentjen, y también le asalta la duda de si esto no ha sucedido ya. Si él se somete a la muerte que viene de los muertos, reconciliará a los muertos y estos se aplacarán ante tal sacrificio. ¡Este pensamiento sí puede llegar a ser consolador! Y como el insomne puede sentirse poseído de una cólera más irresistible que aquel que vela en estado de somnolencia, experimenta también la felicidad mucho más embriagadoramente, casi podría decirse que la experimenta con una facilidad salvaje. Sí, esta sensación vaporosa y libre de trabas, esta sensación de felicidad puede llegar a ser tan diáfana que la oscuridad empiece a iluminarse bajo sus párpados cerrados. Pues ahora ya no cabía ninguna duda de que él, hombre viviente con quien las mujeres podían engendrar un hijo, si se entregaba a mamá Hentjen y a su muerte, llevaría a término, mediante esta medida fuera de lo

común, no solo la redención de Ilona, al liberarla para siempre de los cuchillos, al hacerle recobrar su belleza apartándola de la muerte y devolviéndole una nueva virginidad, sino que necesariamente salvaría también de igual modo a mamá Hentjen de la muerte, haciendo que su seno recuperara la vida a fin de poder engendrar a aquel que reedificará el tiempo.

Entonces le parece que llega desde la más remota lejanía metido en su cama, y que está de nuevo en un lugar determinado y en una alcoba concreta, y el insomne, renacido dentro de un ansia nueva, sabe que ha llegado a la meta, no a aquella meta definitiva y última en que el símbolo y el arquetipo constituyen una nueva unidad, sino en aquella otra meta transitoria con la que lo terrenal debe conformarse, meta que él llama amor y que se erige frente a lo inalcanzable como el último baluarte accesible de la costa. Igualmente, en contraposición al símbolo y al arquetipo, las mujeres están extrañamente unidas y, no obstante, separadas; desde luego mamá Hentjen está en Colonia esperándole, él lo sabe perfectamente, y por supuesto Ilona se ha alejado hacia lo inaccesible e invisible, y él sabe que nunca la volverá a ver, pero allá lejos, en aquel horizonte donde se funden lo visible con lo invisible, lo alcanzable con lo inalcanzable, allá caminan errantes las dos, y ambas siluetas se confunden entre sí fundiéndose en una sola, y aunque en algún momento lleguen a desligarse, permanecen siempre unidas en una esperanza jamás realizada: si él abraza a mamá Hentjen con un amor perfecto y toma sobre sí su vida como si fuera la propia, liberándola a ella, la muerta, para despertarla, si toma entre sus brazos amorosamente a esta mujer que se está marchitando, extraerá todo el peso del envejecimiento y del recuerdo del cuerpo de Ilona, y alcanzará de este modo el grado más alto de su anhelo a través de la nueva y virginal belleza de Ilona; las dos mujeres, así separadas y no obstante unidas, eran imagen refleja del Uno, de aquel ente invisible hacia el cual no se tiene derecho a volver la mirada y que sin embargo es la patria.

El insomne ha llegado a la meta. Si bien en su estado de sobreexcitación conocía ya de antemano la solución, comprende que él simplemente ha tendido un hilo lógico en torno a ella, y solo debe permanecer insomne en tanto ese hilo sutil pueda alargarse más; pero ahora se permite atar el último cabo, y parece como si hubiera hallado solución a un intrincado trabajo de contabilidad e incluso parece que sea algo más que un trabajo de contabilidad: ha asumido la verdadera misión del amor con la perfecta decisión que este encierra al someter su vida terrenal a mamá Hentjen. Le hubiera gustado hacer partícipe de este resultado a Ilona, pero tenía que renunciar a esta satisfacción debido al defectuoso dominio que ella tenía del idioma alemán.

El insomne abre los ojos, reconoce su habitación y finalmente se duerme satisfecho.

Se había decidido por mamá Hentjen. Definitivamente. Esch no miraba hacia fuera por la ventanilla. Y al concentrar sus pensamientos en el amor perfecto y sin condiciones realizaba una especie de experimento atrevido: amigos y clientes estarían empinando el codo en el local brillantemente iluminado; él entraría y, sin tener en cuenta los numerosos testigos, mamá Hentjen correría a su encuentro y se echaría en sus brazos. Pero cuando llegó a Colonia, estas imágenes se enturbiaron extrañamente; aquella no era la ciudad que él conocía, y el camino a través de las calles, a la caída de la tarde, se extendía extraño e interminable ante él. Resultaba incomprensible que hubiera estado fuera únicamente seis días. El tiempo había dejado de existir y la casa que le abría sus puertas era indefinible, la estancia también era indefinible en su borrosa amplitud. Esch se quedó de pie en la puerta, mirando hacia mamá Hentjen. Esta ocupaba su trono detrás del mostrador. Encima del espejo brillaba una luz bajo una pantalla multicolor, el silencio flotaba en el aire y en aquel recinto sombrío no había un solo cliente. No ocurría nada. ¿Por qué había venido aquí? Mamá Hentjen no se movió de detrás del mostrador y finalmente, con aquel tono de indiferencia tan propio de ella, dijo «Buenos días», mientras recorría el local con tímida mirada. A él le invadió una profunda cólera, y de pronto no comprendió por qué se había decidido por aquella mujer. Por tanto dijo a su vez simplemente «Buenos días», ya que, si bien él de alguna manera aprobaba la orgullosa frialdad de ella y sabía, además, que a él no le correspondía pagarle con la misma moneda, estaba no obstante furioso: aquel que lleva en su corazón la resolución del amor absoluto tiene, al menos, derecho a una paridad; dijo en tono triunfante: «Gracias por tu carta». Ella recorrió de nuevo el local con la mirada y repuso enfadada: «¿Y si alguien lo oye?». Esch, totalmente fuera de sí, dijo: «Bueno, ¿y qué? ¡Deja de una vez esos secretos absurdos!». Lo dijo sin ton ni son y sin pretender nada, pues el local estaba vacío y ni él mismo sabía por qué estaba allí. Mamá Hentjen guardó silencio asustada, e hizo como si se arreglara el peinado. Desde que lo había acompañado a la estación, sentía un gran remordimiento y también temor de haber ido demasiado lejos, de haberse entregado demasiado, y precisamente desde que había enviado a Mannheim aquella irreflexiva carta, a mamá Hentjen le había entrado verdadero pánico; le habría agradecido a Esch que no mencionara la carta. Pero ahora que él, con expresión adusta e implacable, insistía en sus derechos, ella se sintió otra vez apresada entre gruesas cadenas de hierro y totalmente indefensa. Esch dijo: «También me puedo marchar», y ahora ella hubiera salido realmente de detrás del mostrador, de no haber entrado en aquel preciso momento los primeros clientes. Así pues permanecieron quietos los dos en silencio, después mamá Hentjen, recalcando claramente con su tono despectivo que solo lo decía para poner fin a aquella escena, susurró: «Ven esta noche». Esch no contestó; se limitó a tomar asiento en una de las

mesas frente a un vaso de vino. Se sentía desamparado, huérfano. Los cálculos que había hecho el día anterior, tan claros, se le aparecían ahora absolutamente confusos: ¿por qué debía decidirse por esta mujer a causa de Ilona? Miró a su alrededor y el local le siguió pareciendo desconocido; ya nada le concernía; estaba demasiado lejos de todo esto. ¿Qué era lo que, en realidad, tenía que hacer en Colonia? Hacía mucho tiempo que debía estar en América. Mas en aquel momento su mirada tropezó con el retrato del señor Hentjen, que colgaba allá arriba sobre las insignias de la libertad, y fue como si de pronto recobrara la memoria; se hizo traer tinta y papel, y con su mejor letra de contable escribió:

DENUNCIA

Pongo en conocimiento de la ilustre jefatura de policía que el señor Eduard von Bertrand, residente en Badenweiler, presidente del consejo de administración de la compañía naviera Mittelrheinische S. A. de Mannheim, sostiene relaciones deshonestas con personas de sexo masculino, y estoy dispuesto a probar mi declaración actuando de testigo.

Cuando se disponía a estampar su firma al pie del escrito quedó perplejo, pues había estado a punto de escribir «Por los afligidos deudos», y aunque esto le daba risa, sintió miedo. Pero finalmente puso en el papel su nombre y su dirección y lo guardó en su cartera cuidadosamente doblado. Hasta mañana, se dijo, es el último plazo. En la cartera estaba también la postal de Badenweiler. Se preguntó si debía entregársela a mamá Hentjen aquella noche. Se sentía desamparado. Pero de pronto volvió a ver ante sí la alcoba y la vio otra vez a ella en su actitud sexual, tan excitante y dolorosa al mismo tiempo, y cuando él pasó por delante del mostrador su voz era ronca: «Hasta luego, pues». Ella, sentada muy tiesa en su silla, no dio muestras de haberle oído, y él experimentó de nuevo una profunda cólera, si bien era una cólera distinta a la de antes; volvió sobre sus pasos y sin la menor consideración preguntó en tono muy alto: «¿Tendrás la amabilidad de quitar el retrato de allá arriba?». Ella continuó inmóvil y él cerró ruidosamente la puerta tras de sí.

Cuando regresó más tarde y quiso abrir, encontró la puerta de entrada con el cerrojo echado por dentro. Sin tener en cuenta si la criada podía oírle, tocó el timbre y, como no se notó ningún movimiento, lo volvió a tocar una v otra vez. Surtió efecto: oyó pasos; casi deseaba que fuera la joven criada: le diría que había olvidado algo en el café; además, la pequeña no le rechazaría y esto sería una buena lección para las mamás. Sin embargo, no fue la criadita quien abrió, sino la señora Hentjen en persona; estaba todavía completamente vestida y lloraba. Ambas cosas aumentaron su cólera. Subieron la escalera en silencio y una vez arriba él se echó sobre ella sin ningún preámbulo. Cuando ella sucumbió y se ablandaron sus besos, él preguntó en tono de amenaza: «¿Quitarás el retrato?». Ella de momento no supo de qué hablaba y cuando se dio cuenta no acababa de comprender: «¿El retrato…? Ya, el retrato. ¿Por qué? ¿Es que no te gusta?». Al ver que ella no comprendía, Esch contestó desesperado: «No, no me gusta… Hay muchas cosas que no me gustan». Ella dijo amable y complaciente: «Si a ti no te gusta, puedo ponerlo en cualquier otro sitio». Era tan indescriptiblemente tonta que únicamente hubiera podido lograrse algo a golpes. Pero Esch se dominó: «Quemaremos el retrato». «¿Quemarlo?» «Sí, quemarlo. Y si sigues haciéndote la tonta de esta manera, acabaré por prender fuego a toda la tienda.» Ella se apartó de él asustada y Esch, satisfecho del efecto que habían causado sus palabras, dijo: «A fin de cuentas, podría parecerte bien. No te gusta la taberna». Ella no contestó y, aunque probablemente no pensaba nada, sino que simplemente veía ya las llamas elevándose por encima del tejado, daba la impresión de querer ocultar algo. Él la increpó: «¿Por qué no dices nada?». El tono hiriente de estas palabras la paralizó. ¿Es que no había forma de conmover a aquella mujer? ¿Cómo obligarla a quitarse la máscara? Esch se había puesto de pie y ahora estaba junto a la entrada de la alcoba con aire amenazador, como si quisiera evitar que ella huyera. Había que llamar a las cosas por su nombre, de lo contrario no se podía seguir adelante con aquel pedazo de carne. No obstante, solo logró formular una pregunta con voz ronca e insegura: «¿Por qué te casaste con él?», y su propia pregunta despertó en él tanta cólera y desesperación, que se refugió en Erna con el pensamiento. A Erna la había abandonado, a pesar de que a su lado nada le atormentaba y junto a ella carecía totalmente de importancia qué tipo de imágenes fálicas tuviera ella en su memoria. Y a él le hubiera sido absolutamente indiferente que Erna hubiera tenido hijos o hubiera evitado tenerlos por medios artificiales. Él temía la respuesta, no quería oírla, y sin embargo gritó: «¿No me contestas?». La señora Hentjen, en cambio, concibiendo el temor de entregarse de nuevo en demasía, quizá temiendo también que pudiera echarse a perder la aureola por la que ella se creía amada, sacó fuerzas de flaqueza para responder: «Hace tanto tiempo de eso… Poco puede importarte, ¿no?». Esch adelantó la mandíbula inferior, dejó al descubierto su dentadura de caballo y gritó: «Poco puede importarme… Poco puede importarme… ¡Efectivamente, me da igual! ¡Me importa un bledo!». O sea que así recompensaba ella su entrega absoluta e ilimitada y toda su tortura. Era tonta y obtusa; a él, que había tomado sobre sí el destino de ella como si fuera el suyo propio, a él, que quería tomar sobre sí toda la vida de ella aunque la misma muerte la había ya avejentado y contaminado, a él, August Esch, que estaba dispuesto a entregarse totalmente a ella con plena decisión, a él, que quería depositar en ella todo cuanto le era extraño a fin de, por vía de intercambio por así decirlo, adquirir todo cuanto le era extraño a ella y a sus pensamientos, por doloroso que resultara: ¡a él no debía importarle aquello! Oh, era tonta y obtusa, y, por serlo, él tuvo que pegarle; se acercó

a la cama y levantó la mano y la golpeó en la mejilla gorda e inmóvil, como si así pudiera golpear también la inmovilidad de su alma. Ella no se defendió, sino que permaneció tendida rígida, y aunque él le hubiera lanzado cuchillos, tampoco se habría movido. La mejilla de la mujer enrojeció y, cuando se deslizó una lágrima por ella, la cólera de Esch se apaciguó. Se sentó en la cama y mamá Hentjen se hizo a un lado para dejarle sitio. Entonces él ordenó: «Nos casaremos». Ella contestó simplemente «Sí», y Esch estuvo a punto de montar nuevamente en cólera, porque ella no dijo que se sentía feliz de poder prescindir por fin del apellido odiado que llevaba. Ella no supo darle otra respuesta que rodearle con sus brazos y atraerlo hacia sí. Esch estaba muy cansado y la dejó hacer; tal vez estaba bien así, tal vez carecía de importancia, pues, frente al reino de la redención, todo es igualmente inseguro, todo momento es inseguro, incluso los números y las sumas son inseguros. En realidad estaba de nuevo amargado: ¿qué sabía ella del reino de la redención? ¿Qué quería ella saber? ¡Probablemente tan poco como Korn! Se necesitaría mucho tiempo para hacérselo entender. Pero uno debía conformarse, debía esperar a que ella comprendiera, debía permitir que llevase la contabilidad de la taberna como lo venía haciendo. En el país de la justicia, en América, todo sería distinto; allá el pasado se consumiría como yesca. Y cuando ella, anonadada, preguntó si se había detenido en Ober-Wesel, él no se enfadó, sino que movió la cabeza muy serio y refunfuñó: «Bah, ¿para qué?». Y así festejaron su noche de bodas, discutieron la posibilidad de vender la taberna, y mamá Hentjen le estuvo muy agradecida de que no pensara ya en prenderle fuego. Al cabo de un mes podían estar en alta mar. Al día siguiente él se ocuparía de poner de nuevo en marcha el negocio de América con Teltscher.

Esch se quedó más tiempo que de costumbre. Y no bajaron la escalera de puntillas. Cuando ella le acompañó hasta la puerta, ya había gente en la calle. Esto le llenó de orgullo.

A la mañana siguiente se dirigió al Alhambra. Naturalmente todavía no había nadie. Curioseó la correspondencia que había encima de la mesa de Teltscher. Encontró un sobre sin abrir escrito de su puño y letra, y quedó tan sorprendido que de momento ni lo reconoció: era la carta para Erna que él había escrito en Mannheim. Buen escándalo armaría por haber pasado tanto tiempo sin recibir respuesta. Y no sin razón. Chusma desordenada esta gente de teatro.

Por fin llegó Teltscher con su andar oscilante. Esch casi se alegró de volver a verle. Teltscher estaba condescendiente:

—Bueno, ya era hora de que volviera usted por aquí… Cada uno se ocupa de sus asuntos privados y el pobre Teltscher tiene que hacer el trabajo más enojoso. ¿Que dónde está Gernerth? Pues en Munich con su respetable familia… Enfermedades graves en la familia… Deben de estar resfriados.

Esch murmuró que ya volvería.

—El señor director tiene que volver muy pronto. Ayer no había en la sala ni cincuenta personas. Hay que hablar de esto con Oppenheimer.

—Está bien —dijo Esch—, vamos a ver a Oppenheimer.

Con Oppenheimer acordaron que era necesario anunciar las últimas representaciones. «¿No se lo advertí?», dijo Oppenheimer, «estaba bien lo de los combates femeninos, pero ¡siempre combates! ¿A quién puede interesarle?». A Esch esta situación podía favorecerle; bastaba con reclamar sus beneficios al regreso de Gernerth, y cuanto antes se terminara con todo aquello, antes podrían marcharse a América.

Esta vez llevó consigo voluntariamente a Teltscher a almorzar, pues se trataba de poner en marcha los proyectos con respecto a América. En cuanto llegaron a la calle, sacó Esch del bolsillo la lista de las muchachas y contó las que él había seleccionado para el viaje. «Sí, yo también tengo algunas», dijo Teltscher, «pero antes tiene que devolverme Gernerth mi dinero.» Esch se extrañó, porque Teltscher hubiera debido ser pagado con las aportaciones de Erna y de Lohberg. Teltscher dijo irritado: «¿Y con qué dinero cree usted que hemos financiado los combates? Existía un pasivo. ¿No lo comprende? Él me endosó el material, pero ¿qué hago yo con este material en América?». Verdaderamente esto era un tanto sorprendente, pero, de todos modos, cuando se hubiera liquidado el negocio de los combates, Gernerth dispondría de capital y Teltscher podría emprender el viaje. «Ilona se vendrá con nosotros», decidió Teltscher. En eso te equivocas, querido mío, pensó Esch, Ilona ya no tenía nada que ver con estas cosas; aunque en estos momentos todavía estuviera acostándose con Korn, esto no duraría mucho tiempo, y ella viviría dentro de muy poco en un castillo lejano e inasequible, en cuyo parque pacerían los ciervos. Esch dijo que tenía que ir a la jefatura de policía y dieron un pequeño rodeo. Esch compró en una papelería un sobre y los periódicos; se guardó los periódicos en el bolsillo y cubrió el sobre con una dirección rica en florituras caligráficas. Luego sacó de la cartera la denuncia cuidadosamente doblada, la puso dentro del sobre y se dirigió a la jefatura. Cuando salió del edificio reanudó la conversación: no hacía ninguna falta que Ilona fuera con ellos. «Claro que sí», dijo Teltscher, «en primer lugar por los brillantes ofrecimientos que encontraremos allá, y en segundo lugar, caso de que el viaje fracase, será necesario trabajar. Bastante ha holgazaneado. Además ya le he escrito». «Tonterías», dijo Esch groseramente, «cuando uno comercia con muchachas, no lleva consigo a ninguna mujer.» Teltscher se rió: «¡Vaya, vaya! Si usted opina que debo dejarlo, cómpreme las posibilidades americanas. Ahora es usted un gran

capitalista… De un viaje de negocios suele uno traerse dinero a casa… ¿no?». Esch se desconcertó; parecía como si Teltscher guiñara los ojos en dirección a la jefatura de policía. ¿Qué podía significar esto? ¿Qué sabía este prestidigitador judío? ¡Pero si ni él mismo sabía nada, en realidad, del viaje! Increpó a Teltscher: «¡Váyase al diablo! Yo no he traído ningún dinero». «Bueno, no se enfade, señor Esch, no lo tome a mal. He hablado por hablar.»

Entraron en la taberna de mamá Hentjen, y a Esch de nuevo le pareció como si Teltscher poseyera algún secreto según el cual le pudiera llamar «asesino». No se atrevía a recorrer el local con la mirada. Finalmente levantó los ojos del suelo y en el sitio del retrato del señor Hentjen encontró una mancha blanca en cuyos bordes colgaban pequeñas telarañas. Miró a Teltscher, pero este no dijo nada, porque evidentemente no había notado nada, ¡no, no había notado nada! Esch se sintió casi orgulloso y, en parte por presunción, en parte para desviar la atención de Teltscher del retrato, se dirigió a la pianola e hizo que tocara su ruidosa pieza; a causa del ruido apareció mamá Hentjen y a Esch le entraron ganas de saludarla con ostentosas manifestaciones de confianza y cordialidad: le hubiera gustado presentarla a todo el mundo como la señora Esch, y si se abstuvo de gastarle esta broma cariñosa, no fue únicamente porque le estaba agradecido y porque estaba dispuesto a respetar su reserva, sino porque consideraba al señor Teltscher-Teltini totalmente indigno de tal prueba de confianza. No obstante, Esch no se sentía en absoluto obligado a llevar esta discreción demasiado lejos, y cuando Teltscher se dispuso a marcharse después de comer, él no le acompañó como de costumbre, para regresar más tarde dando un rodeo, sino que dijo abiertamente que quería quedarse y leer sus periódicos. Sacó los periódicos del bolsillo, pero los volvió a guardar. Se quedó sentado. Sus manos reposaban tranquilas sobre las rodillas. No le apetecía leer. Se quedó mirando la mancha blanca de la pared. Y cuando todo quedó en silencio, subió arriba. Estaba agradecido a mamá Hentjen y pasaron una tarde agradable. Volvieron a hablar de la posibilidad de vender la taberna y Esch opinó que tal vez Oppenheimer podría encontrar comprador. Y hablaron también delicadamente de su boda. En el techo de la alcoba había una mancha que parecía una mariposa negra, pero era simplemente suciedad.

Por la noche, cumpliendo con su obligación, se disponía a salir en busca de muchachas. Pero se dijo que era mejor ver primero qué había sido de aquel muchacho, Harry. Le buscó en vano y ya estaba a punto de salir de aquel antro cuando llegó Alfons. El gordo apareció en un estado rarísimo; su pelo, todo grasiento y en completo desorden, estaba totalmente pegado al cráneo; llevaba aquella misma camisa de seda, pero abierta, con lo que se le veía el pecho, blanquecino y casi sin vello; en conjunto, su aspecto hacía pensar en un colchón revuelto. Esch no pudo contener la risa. El gordo se dejó caer ante una mesa cerca de la entrada, y sollozó. Esch, de pie ante él, seguía riendo, pero daba la impresión de querer acallar algo con su risa.

—Hola, Alfons. ¿Qué pasa?

El músico, desde su obesidad, le lanzó una mirada opaca y hostil.

—Que te traigan algo de beber y cuenta lo que ha pasado.

Alfons bebió un coñac sin pronunciar palabra. Finalmente dijo:

—¡Santo Dios…! Esto es inaudito… ¡Tiene la culpa de todo y todavía pregunta qué ha pasado!

—No digas tonterías y di de una vez qué ha pasado.

—¡Dios Santo! ¡Ha muerto!

Alfons apoyó el rostro en las manos y se quedó rígido con la mirada en el vacío. Esch tomó asiento en la mesa:

—Pero ¿quién ha muerto?

Alfons tartamudeó:

—Él le amaba tanto, tanto…

La situación volvía a resultar cómica:

—¿Quién amaba? ¿Y a quién?

La voz de Alfons cambió:

—No finja usted; Harry ha muerto.

Vaya, conque Harry había muerto. Esch, en realidad, se negaba a comprender; miraba al gordo con aire de no entender nada. Al músico le corrían las lágrimas por las mejillas:

—Usted le volvió loco con todo lo que le dijo aquel día… Él le amaba tanto… Cuando lo leyó en el periódico, se encerró… Hoy al mediodía… Y ahora le hemos encontrado… Veronal.

Vaya, Harry había muerto; de alguna manera esto era justo; tenía que ocurrir. Solo que Esch ignoraba qué clase de justicia encerraba aquel hecho.

—Pobre diablo —dijo, y de repente lo supo, sintió una felicidad liberadora por haber entregado aquel mismo día la carta a la jefatura de policía; por fin aparecían ahora juntos asesinato y contraasesinato, carta y carta de respuesta, de acuerdo con las reglas de contabilidad: ¡la cuenta había sido saldada clara y correctamente! Solo resultaba extraño que él, a pesar de ello, tuviera que ser culpable de algo, y repitió—: Pobre diablo… ¿Por qué lo ha hecho?

Alfons le miró con los ojos vidriosos, como si le hubieran robado el alma:

—Es que no lo ha leído en el periódico…

—¿Qué?

—Ahí…

Alfons señaló el paquete de periódicos que asomaban del bolsillo de la chaqueta de Esch. Esch se encogió de hombros; había olvidado los periódicos. Los sacó: ahí estaba, muy grande y ribeteado de negro, repetido varias veces en la última página, pues ninguna de sus empresas, ni sus empleados, ni los trabajadores se habían privado de la oportunidad de anunciar la dolorosa noticia de que el señor Eduard von Bertrand, presidente del consejo de administración, caballero de una alta orden, etc., había fallecido tras breve y penosa enfermedad. Pero unas páginas antes, junto a respetables artículos necrológicos, se podía leer que el difunto, atacado al parecer por un repentino acceso de locura, había puesto fin a su vida con un tiro de revólver. Esch lo leyó, pero le interesó poco. Únicamente llegó a la conclusión de que había sido muy justo haber sacado precisamente hoy el retrato. Pero resultaba realmente cómico que alguien ajeno por completo a todo esto, como aquel músico, armara tanto barullo. Con una mueca de ironía y un gesto benevolente y tranquilizador, dio al gordo unos golpecitos en su mullida espalda, le pagó la copa y se fue a casa de mamá Hentjen. Caminaba a pasos largos y cómodos, pensaba en Martin y en que este ya no le perseguiría más con sus duras muletas ni le seguiría amenazando. Y también esto estaba bien.

Una vez solo, el músico Alfons apoyó los puños en las sienes y se quedó con la mirada fija en el vacío. Esch le parecía un hombre malo, como todos los hombres que corren detrás de mujeres para poseerlas. Su experiencia le decía que todos esos hombres traían desgracia. Le parecían locos corredores, atacados de amor, que vuelan por el mundo, y ante cuya cercanía, lo único que uno puede hacer es ocultarse. Él despreciaba a esos hombres, que llegaban veloces y excitados, ávidos no de la vida, que evidentemente ni siquiera veían, sino de alguna otra cosa que estaba más allá de la vida y por cuya causa, en nombre de una especie de amor, destruían la vida. El músico Alfons estaba demasiado triste para poder pensar todo esto con claridad, pero sabía que esos hombres, aunque hablaban del amor con gran pasión, solo pensaban en la posesión, o como se llamara lo que la gente entendía por eso. Lo que él dijera o hiciera carecía totalmente de importancia ya que, en el mejor de los casos, era un hombre sin ideas, un músico de orquesta venido a menos, pero sabía que no se puede alcanzar el absoluto en cuanto se opta por una mujer. Y disculpaba la furia perversa de los hombres, pues sabía también que esta se debe al miedo y a la decepción; sabía que aquellos hombres perversos y apasionados corren tras un fragmento de la eternidad, que les proteja del miedo que se yergue sobre sus espaldas anunciándoles la muerte. Él era un simple violinista, tonto y sin ideas, pero era capaz de tocar sonatas de memoria y, puesto que sabía muchas cosas, podía sonreír pese a su tristeza, al pensar en la gente que, en su angustiosa búsqueda de lo absoluto, pretendía amarse eternamente, imaginando que así su vida no tendría fin y sería eterna. Aunque le despreciaran a él porque a veces se veía obligado a tocar también popurrís y polcas rápidas, había llegado, no obstante, a la conclusión de que esas personas acorraladas, que buscan lo imperecedero y lo absoluto en lo terrenal, encuentran siempre únicamente símbolos o sustitutivos de lo que buscan, sin que les sea posible darles nombre: ven la muerte de otro sin pena ni tristeza, al vivir poseídos por su locura; corren locamente tras la posesión, para ser poseídos por ella, y esperan hallar en dicha posesión lo seguro e inmutable que debe protegerlos y poseerlos, y odian a la mujer por quien se han decidido en su ceguera, la odian porque ella es un mero símbolo que ellos aniquilan llenos de furia cuando se encuentran de nuevo a merced del miedo y de la muerte. Alfons el músico sentía compasión por las mujeres; pues, aunque ellas tampoco son mejores, no han sucumbido a esta estúpida y destructora pasión de poseer, y están menos acosadas por el miedo, se sienten más arrobadas cuando se les brinda música, y están en una relación más íntima y familiar con la muerte: en esto las mujeres se parecen a los músicos, y aunque uno sea solamente un obeso músico homosexual que toca en una orquesta, es posible sentirse emparentado con ellas, puede concederles un fragmento del presentimiento de que la muerte es algo triste y hermoso, sabiendo que ellas no lloran porque se les haya quitado una posesión, sino algo que era bueno y grato utilizar y contemplar. ¡Oh, qué loca confusión es la vida, incomprendida por los hombres ávidos de posesión, comprendida apenas por los demás, y presentida, en cambio, por la música, símbolo sonoro de todo lo pensado que suprime el tiempo para recogerlo en cada compás, que suprime la muerte para hacerla resucitar de nuevo en el sonido! Aquel que, como las mujeres y los músicos, ha intuido esto, puede aceptar ser tonto y carecer de ideas, y el músico Alfons sentía las redondeces de grasa de su cuerpo como si fueran una buena y suave manta, a través de la cual se pudiera palpar algo valioso y merecedor de amor: no importaba que la gente le despreciara e insultara tratándole de afeminado, sí, él era tan solo un pobre perro, pero estaba no obstante entregado a la multiplicidad de la eternidad con más dicha y cansancio y ternura que aquellos que le insultaban, y que únicamente construían un pequeño fragmento terrenal como símbolo y meta de su triste afán. Era él quien podía despreciar a los otros. También Esch le daba pena, y no pudo alejar de su pensamiento las marchas heroicas que acompañan a los luchadores cuando entran en la arena, con objeto de infundirles ánimos y hacerles olvidar la muerte que se yergue a sus espaldas. Se planteó la cuestión de si debía o no ir a velar el cadáver de Harry, pero le aterrorizó aquella faz de cera y prefirió emborracharse y observar a los camareros y

demás clientes, que se movían de un lado a otro, y llevaban, sin embargo, el sello de la muerte en sus semblantes.

Aquella noche, a la misma hora, Ilona se incorporó en la cama y, a la luz de la lamparilla de aceite situada bajo la imagen de la Virgen, contempló a Balthasar Korn mientras dormía. Roncaba, y cada vez que se interrumpía el ronquido, producía la misma impresión que cuando, en el teatro, callaba la música antes de realizar ella su número; en el silbido del aliento de Korn resonaba el suave zumbido de los cuchillos atravesando el aire. Pero Ilona no estaba pensando precisamente en esto, aunque la carta de Teltscher la reclamaba para el trabajo. Observaba a Korn e intentaba imaginárselo sin bigote, y también cómo podía ser su aspecto de muchacho. No sabía con exactitud por qué hacía esto, pero le parecía que así la Virgen de la pared podría perdonar más fácilmente su pecado. Porque era un pecado haber utilizado ante los sagrados ojos de una Virgen a aquel hombre para un placer impío, y si ella no se hubiera contagiado tan pronto de la enfermedad, también ella habría tenido hijos. El hecho de abandonar a Korn le era indiferente; sabía que otro le seguiría, y le era también indiferente volver al lado de Teltscher; no se hacía muchas ilusiones porque él la estuviera esperando en Colonia o porque hubiera quedado a merced de ella, sabía simplemente que él la necesitaba para poderle lanzar los cuchillos. También le era indiferente tener que ir a América. Había viajado lo suficiente, demasiado, y América le parecía una ciudad como cualquier otra. Ilona vivía sin esperanza y sin angustia. Había aprendido a abandonar a los hombres, pero, hoy por hoy, se sentía todavía propiedad de Korn. Ella tenía una cicatriz en el cuello, y en aquel entonces había dado la razón al hombre que quiso matarla porque le había sido infiel. Si Korn le hubiera sido infiel, no lo habría matado, lo habría rociado con vitriolo. Sí, este reparto de papeles le parecía adecuado en los celos, pues aquel que posee quiere aniquilar, pero quien únicamente utiliza, puede contentarse con hacer inutilizable el objeto. Esto es válido para todos los seres humanos, y hasta para la reina de Inglaterra. Porque los seres humanos son todos iguales y nadie puede hacer el bien a los demás. Cuando ella estaba sobre el escenario, había luz, y cuando ella estaba acostada con un hombre, había oscuridad. Vivir significaba comer y comer significaba vivir. En cierta ocasión alguien se había suicidado por ella: este hecho no la había conmovido demasiado, pero le gustaba recordarlo. Todo lo demás se hundía en la sombra, y en la sombra se movían las personas como sombras más oscuras que se funden unas en otras para separarse de nuevo. Todas traían únicamente desgracias, como si tuvieran que castigarse cuando buscaban el placer unos en otros. Ella se sentía un poco orgullosa porque también había causado desgracias, y cuando aquel hombre se había matado por su causa, había sido como una expiación y una compensación que Dios le había otorgado por su esterilidad. Muchas cosas resultaban incomprensibles, en realidad todo resultaba incomprensible. No se podía penetrar en el sentido de los acontecimientos; únicamente cuando venían niños al mundo, parecía que el imperio de las sombras se condensaba y adquiría cuerpo, y entonces era como si una dulce música llenara para siempre el mundo de las sombras. Por eso probablemente lleva María en brazos al niño Jesús allá arriba, sobre la lucecita roja. Erna se casará y tendrá hijos: ¿por qué Lohberg no la tomaba a ella en lugar de a aquella mujercilla amarillenta y angulosa? Observó a Korn y no halló en su rostro nada de lo que buscaba; los puños peludos yacían sobre la sábana y nunca habían sido jóvenes ni delicados. Sintió horror ante aquella faz carnosa iluminada por la luz roja, aquella faz en la que se destacaba el bigote, y con los pies descalzos se fue sin hacer ruido al cuarto de Erna, se deslizó suave y cansadamente a su lado, se apretó con dulzura contra aquel cuerpo anguloso, y en esta postura pudo conciliar el sueño.

Ahora Esch se comportaba como un novio o, dicho más exactamente, como un protector, pues no habían dejado traslucir todavía nada de sus relaciones, pero Esch sabía cómo debía actuarse ante una débil mujer, y ella permitía que él velara por sus intereses. Esch no solo mantenía los tratos con el hombre que traía el agua mineral y el hielo, sino también con Oppenheimer, a quien, por sugerencia suya, se había confiado la venta de la taberna. El enérgico Oppenheimer efectivamente, cuando se terciaba, compaginaba sus negocios teatrales con las ventas de fincas o con cualquier otro tipo de negocios, y desde luego estuvo dispuesto, con sumo gusto, a dedicar la conveniente atención al presente caso. No obstante, por el momento tenía otras preocupaciones en la cabeza. Había acudido para examinar la casar pero se detuvo a la mitad de la escalera y dijo: «Este asunto de Gernerth no se explica. Dios quiera que no le haya ocurrido nada… Claro que no sé por qué me preocupo, no es de mi incumbencia». Y aunque con ello intentaba tranquilizarse, hacía continuamente alusión al hecho de que Gernerth llevaba ya ocho días ausente, precisamente ahora que querían terminar con lo de los combates y necesitarían dinero para los pagos y el alquiler atrasado. Que Gernerth, un hombre tan formal, hubiera podido retrasarse en el pago de los alquileres, era algo que nunca se hubiera imaginado. Y sin embargo el negocio, hasta el último momento, había ido viento en popa; mejor no podía haber marchado. Ahora, naturalmente, no daba ni siquiera para cubrir gastos. Así pues, había llegado el momento de terminar. «Y el burro de Teltscher le deja marchar sin tener ninguna llave de la caja y sin poder disponer de nada. ¡Pero él había puesto dinero en el Banco de Darmstadt…! Era demasiado fino el señor Teltscher, el gran artista, para ocuparse de estas cosas.»

Esch había escuchado sin poner demasiada atención, sobre todo porque le parecía ver con diáfana claridad que Teltscher se interesaba más por América que por los combates ya agonizantes. Pero ahora aguzó los oídos: ¿dinero en Darmstadt? Increpó a Oppenheimer: «Entre el dinero del Banco de Darmstadt están las aportaciones de mis amigos, ¡es absolutamente necesario que ese dinero vuelva aquí!». Oppenheimer movió la cabeza: «En realidad yo no tengo nada que ver», dijo, «pero de todos modos telegrafiaré a Gernerth a Munich. Él debe venir y poner las cosas en claro. Usted tiene razón, hay que poner orden en todo este asunto.» Esch aprobó esta medida y el telegrama se envió; no recibieron respuesta. Muy inquietos, dos días más tarde enviaron otro con respuesta pagada dirigido a la señora Gernerth, y así se enteraron de que Gernerth no había estado ni por un momento en su casa. Esto era sospechoso. ¡Y en aquel fin de semana había que hacer efectivos los pagos! Era necesario ponerlo en conocimiento de la policía; la policía hizo averiguaciones en Darmstadt y resultó que unas tres semanas antes había sido retirado de la cuenta de Gernerth todo el saldo que quedaba; así pues, no cabía duda: ¡Gernerth había huido con el dinero! Teltscher, que hasta el último momento había defendido a Gernerth y que ahora se llamaba a sí mismo el judío más idiota de la tierra por haberse dejado nuevamente desollar por un hombre perverso, se hizo sospechoso de haber sido cómplice de Gernerth. Teniendo en cuenta que el material había sido hipotecado, tuvo que hacer enormes esfuerzos para demostrar su inocencia; mas de poco le sirvió lograrlo: apenas si tenía en sus bolsillos dinero suficiente para vivir unos pocos días. Desamparado como un niño, se culpaba a sí mismo y al mundo, repetía una y otra vez que Ilona debía llegar, y día tras día martilleaba los oídos de Oppenheimer con su deseo de conseguir otro contrato inmediatamente. A Oppenheimer le resultaba fácil mantener alta la cabeza, pues no se trataba de su dinero; consoló a Teltscher: no había para tanto; todo un Teltscher-Teltini, propietario del material, podía convertirse en un magnífico director de teatro; solo aportando un poco de capital, todo se arreglaría, y podría aún hacer muchos y buenos negocios con el viejo Oppenheimer. Esto fue para Teltscher como una iluminación, recuperó su vivacidad tan fácil y rápidamente que enseguida elucubró un nuevo plan, y acto seguido fue a toda prisa a exponérselo a Esch.

Pero el cariz que habían tomado las cosas había puesto a Esch sumamente furioso. Aunque él siempre había presentido, mejor dicho, sabido que nunca llegaría a emprender el viaje y tal vez precisamente por eso había llevado a cabo la selección de las muchachas de manera ocasional y con desgana, y aunque experimentaba una cierta satisfacción porque su sabiduría íntima había tenido razón, su vida, sin embargo, se había ido orientando de acuerdo con el proyecto de América, y ahora se conmovían sus fibras más íntimas: le parecía como si se hubiera abierto una brecha en la base de sus relaciones con mamá Hentjen. ¿Adónde podría ir con ella? ¿Y cómo se presentaría ante ella? Mamá Hentjen había querido verlo como amo y señor de aquella banda de artistas, ¡y él había caído de forma tan denigrante en la trampa! Realmente, sentía vergüenza frente a mamá Hentjen.

Mientras estaba en este estado de ánimo, apareció de pronto Teltscher con sus planes: «Vea, Esch, ahora es usted un gran capitalista y podría convertirse en mi socio».

Esch le miró fijamente, como a un desequilibrado:

—¿Socio? ¿Se ha vuelto usted loco? Usted sabe tan bien como yo que el proyecto de América se ha quedado en agua de borrajas.

—También se puede ganar dinero en Europa —dijo Teltscher—, y si usted empleara su dinero en algo rentable…

—¿Qué dinero? —gritó Esch.

Bueno, bueno, no era necesario gritar tanto; se comentaba que había heredado algo, dijo Teltscher. Esto aumentó la furia de Esch:

—¡Está usted completamente loco! —rugió—. ¿Qué significa este desatino? No es bastante, por lo visto, haberme dejado atrapar una vez en sus redes…

—Si Gernerth, ese canalla, se ha escapado con el dinero, no puede usted hacerme responsable de ello… —dijo Teltscher ofendido—. Yo he sufrido más perjuicio que usted y no necesita usted insultarme porque mi situación sea penosa, cuando le estoy proponiendo un negocio leal.

—No se trata de mi perjuicio, sino del de mis amigos…

—Yo le brindo la posibilidad de recuperar ese dinero.

Naturalmente era una esperanza, y Esch preguntó de qué modo había planeado Teltscher el asunto. Bueno, con el material ya se podía empezar a hacer algo, eso también lo decía Oppenheimer, y el propio Esch había tenido ocasión de comprobar que se podía ganar algún dinero si se actuaba con cierta habilidad.

—¿Y si no?

Entonces no cabía otra salida que subastar el material y buscar algún contrato junto con Ilona. Esch quedó pensativo: O sea que, en ese caso, Teltscher volvería a tener algún contrato con Ilona… Para lanzar cuchillos… Vaya, vaya… Pensaría en ello…

Al día siguiente fue a consultárselo a Oppenheimer, pues, tratándose de Teltscher, toda precaución era poca. Oppenheimer confirmó las aseveraciones de Teltscher.

—¿Sí…? De modo que era necesario volver a aceptar un contrato con Ilona…

—Yo, desde luego, estoy dispuesto a buscarle algún contrato —dijo Oppenheimer—. ¿Qué puede hacer sino ese Teltscher?

Esch asintió con la cabeza:

—Y si él se hace cargo de algún arrendamiento, necesitará dinero…

—¿No dispone usted de un par de miles? —preguntó Oppenheimer.

No, no los tenía. Oppenheimer movió la cabeza: sin dinero no se podía hacer nada; tal vez se podría interesar a alguien más en el negocio… Por ejemplo, ¿qué tal la señora Hentjen? Se decía que quería vender la taberna y, por tanto, dispondría de una buena suma de dinero. En esto él no tenía nada que ver, repuso Esch, pero lo transmitiría a la señora Hentjen.

No le gustaba hacerlo, pero era una nueva misión que no podía eludir. Esch se sentía atacado con alevosía. Era muy posible que, a pesar de todo, el tal Oppenheimer estuviera confabulado con Teltscher. ¡Ese par de judíos! ¿Por qué un tipo así no sabía hacer otra cosa que lanzar cuchillos? ¡Como si no hubiera trabajos honestos y respetables! ¿Y qué disparates tenía que decir sobre la muerte y la herencia? Le habían acorralado en un callejón sin salida, como si supieran que ya no se podía cambiar el curso de los acontecimientos. ¡Pero había que preservar a Ilona de los cuchillos, y al mundo de la injusticia! ¡No era posible que se hubiera sacrificado a Bertrand en vano y que fuera del todo inútil haber retirado el retrato del señor Hentjen de donde estaba! No, de ningún modo se podía dar marcha atrás, pues se trataba de la justicia y de la libertad, de una libertad que no se podía continuar dejando en manos de los demagogos, de los socialistas y de los emborronadores de periódicos. Esta era la misión a cumplir. Y el hecho de que él tuviera que rescatar el dinero para Lohberg y para Erna era como una parte y un símbolo de aquella misión superior. ¡Y caso de que Teltscher no obtuviera el arrendamiento, el dinero se habría perdido definitivamente! No había escapatoria. Esch sopesó todas las cuentas, las confrontó, hizo cálculos y de ellos surgió la solución inequívoca: tenía que convencer a mamá Hentjen para que ella se pusiera también al servicio de la misión.

En cuanto vio las cosas claras, desaparecieron las sensaciones de inseguridad y de rabia. Cogió su bicicleta, se fue a casa y escribió a Lohberg un informe detallado sobre la increíble e intolerable fechoría del señor director Gernerth, añadiendo que él había tomado de inmediato las medidas necesarias para poner a salvo sus aportaciones, y rogaba a la distinguida señorita Erna que se tranquilizara al respecto.

Así pues, el proyecto de América había quedado en nada. Definitivamente. Ahora era necesario quedarse en Colonia. La puerta de la jaula se había cerrado. Uno había quedado prisionero. La antorcha de la libertad se había extinguido. Y lo más extraño era que no podía enfadarse con Gernerth. Ante todo habría que culpar a quien, pese al encanto de la idea y a la esperanza que despertaba, había desdeñado la posibilidad de huir a América. Sí, así era la ley, aunque no la justicia: aquel que se sacrifica, tiene que entregar antes que nada su libertad. No obstante, la situación seguía siendo inverosímil. Esch repitió, como queriendo convencerse a sí mismo: «prisionero». Y casi de buena fe, solo con muy leves remordimientos de conciencia, explicó a mamá Hentjen que debían aplazar para más adelante el viaje a América, porque Gernerth se había anticipado a fin de poner en marcha el negocio.

Desde luego a mamá Hentjen se le podía contar lo que uno quisiera; ella no se había interesado jamás ni por los combates ni por el director Gernerth, y de los acontecimientos externos únicamente se quería enterar de aquellos que podían beneficiarla. Por tanto, ahora no oyó otra cosa sino que aquel temido viaje al país de la aventura no se realizaría, y la noticia fue para ella como un tibio baño sedante en el que su alma se sumergió inesperadamente, y la disfrutó en silencio antes de decir: «Mañana enviaré a buscar al pintor. De lo contrario llegará el invierno y las paredes no se secarán como es debido». Esch quedó atónito: «¿El pintor? ¿No quieres vender la taberna?». Mamá Hentjen se puso en jarras: «Bueno, bueno, de aquí a que nos marchemos hay tiempo de sobra. Yo la haré pintar, la casa ha de estar bonita». Esch se encogió de hombros, transigiendo: «Es posible que lo recuperemos en el precio de venta». «Sí», dijo mamá Hentjen. Sin embargo, ella no podía deshacerse de un resto de inseguridad —¿quién podía saber si el fantasma del viaje a América había sido realmente conjurado?— y le pareció sumamente conveniente no ahorrar ningún gasto con tal de asegurar su permanencia en el lugar donde residía. Por eso sorprendió agradablemente a Esch y a Oppenheimer cuando, a una simple sugerencia, demostró comprender que mientras durase la ausencia de Gernerth había que financiar el negocio teatral; e igual de rápido fue su consentimiento para que se solicitara una hipoteca sobre la casa, solicitud que, previsoramente, había traído ya consigo Oppenheimer. El asunto se llevó a cabo de forma perfecta, y Oppenheimer obtuvo el uno por ciento de comisión.

De este modo se convirtió mamá Hentjen en socio capitalista de la nueva empresa teatral de Teltscher; gracias a la intervención de Oppenheimer, se alquiló un local en la industriosa Duisburg y cabía esperar que mamá Hentjen participaría de pingües ganancias. Esch puso tres condiciones: en primer lugar, él se haría cargo del control de la contabilidad, en segundo lugar, había que reembolsar los respectivos capitales a Erna y a Lohberg antes de liquidar el material (esto era lo correcto y lo justo, aunque mamá Hentjen no tenía por qué saberlo), y en tercer lugar obligó a los estupefactos señores Teltscher y Oppenheimer a hacer constar en el

contrato que se suprimiría el número sensacionalista de lanzamiento de cuchillos en todas las representaciones. Los dos señores protestaron airadamente, pero Esch no les hizo el menor caso.

Hasta el momento las cosas, en realidad, se habían ido poniendo en orden. El sacrificio aportado por mamá Hentjen le hizo contraer con ella un eterno compromiso convirtiendo su anterior decisión en irrevocable. Si bien aún no se había vendido la odiada taberna, la hipoteca era, al propio tiempo, un primer paso hacia la abolición del pasado. Y en el comportamiento de mamá Hentjen había también muchos detalles que podían significar el comienzo de una vida nueva. Ella no le llevaba jamás la contraria en los planes que él hacía sobre su boda, como tampoco le había replicado en lo de la hipoteca, y el espíritu de mamá Hentjen se había colmado de una dulzura que hasta el momento nadie había conocido en ella. El otoño llegó antes de tiempo, y con él también el frío; mamá Hentjen se volvió a poner aquella prenda de fustán gris y con frecuencia iba sin corsé. Incluso su tieso peinado parecía haberse aflojado; no cabía duda de que no dedicaba a su apariencia externa el cuidado de antes, y también esto marcaba una separación entre el pasado y el presente.

Esch recorría la casa a grandes zancadas. Si uno estaba prisionero y sin ocupación, convenía sacar de ello algún provecho. Desde luego no es que se pudiera considerar la situación como una vida nueva. A la hora del desayuno estaba sentado en la taberna, y a la hora de cenar seguía aún allí. Mamá Hentjen aludía a menudo a un tipo pícaro y vago que se acomodaba aquí a sus anchas, pero lo alimentaba encantada. Esch la dejaba hacer. Leía atentamente el periódico y a veces se dedicaba a contemplar las postales colocadas en el marco del espejo; le gustaba que no hubiera ninguna escrita por él. Y para guardar las apariencias supervisaba el trabajo de los pintores y revocadores. A mamá Hentjen no le costaba nada hablar. ¡Qué podía preocuparla a ella la vida nueva! Las mujeres lo tienen todo más fácil —Esch no pudo contener la risa—, ellas pueden llevar una vida nueva en cualquier parte, especialmente en su corazón. Por eso no quieren salir hacia un mundo nuevo, lo tienen todo entre sus cuatro paredes, ¡opinan que les basta sentarse en su jaula para volver a ser inocentes! Entonces quitan el polvo y friegan el suelo, ¡y creen que con un poco de orden rutinario ya está todo hecho! ¿La vida nueva en la jaula? ¡Como si eso fuera tan sencillo!

No, con pequeños medios, con variantes insignificantes, era imposible construir una vida nueva, no se podía reedificar el estado de inocencia. Lo inmutable, lo terrenal, aquello que alguna vez ha sido realidad, no eran fáciles de alcanzar. La casa permanecía inmutable y no se notaba en ella ninguna señal de la mezquina hipoteca. Las calles estaban inmutables, inmutables se erguían las torres en torno a las que soplaba el viento de otoño, y ya no se percibía en absoluto el aliento del futuro. Y es que en realidad hubiera sido necesario incendiar Colonia por los cuatro costados, dejarla arrasada y llana como un plato, que no quedara piedra sobre piedra, a fin de despertar el pasado y los recuerdos de mamá Hentjen. Pues ¿de qué servía que mamá Hentjen llevase ahora el pelo peinado de forma menos atildada? Paseaba con orgullo por las calles y la gente se quitaba el sombrero a su paso, y todos sabían el nombre que llevaba. Solo Dios sabía que uno no había pensado todo esto cuando, en aras del sacrificio, había cargado sobre sus hombros el avejentamiento de ella y sus marchitos encantos. Sí, si sus cabellos se tornaran blancos en una noche, si ella se convirtiera de golpe en una anciana que no se acuerda de nada, irreconocible para todos, una extraña desprovista de todo vínculo con el ambiente habitual, ¡sí, entonces existiría la vida nueva! Y Esch pensó forzosamente que cada hijo envejece a la madre, y que las mujeres que no tienen hijos jamás se hacen viejas: nunca cambian y están muertas, no son dueñas de ningún tiempo. Pero cuando esperan una vida nueva, están llenas de confianza, y anhelan que su tiempo sea de nuevo computado, y esto es igualmente virginidad renovada y envejecimiento, es confianza en el estado de inocencia de todo lo viviente, sueño predecesor de la muerte y, no obstante, vida nueva, reino de la redención dentro del mundo viejo. Dulzura de una esperanza jamás cumplida.

Desde luego, esto no hubiera sido totalmente del agrado de mamá Hentjen. Lo habría tomado por ideas anarquistas. Puede, incluso, que con razón. Uno tiene, lógicamente, pensamientos revolucionarios y habla en términos revolucionarios cuando va a parar a la cárcel. Y ni uno mismo se da cuenta de ello. Esch subía las escaleras, las bajaba, despotricaba contra la casa, maldecía los escalones, maldecía a los trabajadores. ¡Vaya un bonito aspecto que ofrecía aquí la vida nueva! La mancha clara de la pared donde había estado el retrato del señor Hentjen, el tabernero, había sido pintada, de modo que uno podía pensar que el retrato había desaparecido únicamente porque tenían que pintar. Por ninguna otra razón. Esch se quedó mirando fijamente la pared. No, lo que se había empezado aquí no era en absoluto una vida nueva, al contrario, había que desandar el tiempo pasado. Esta mujer se había propuesto firmemente volverlo todo hacia atrás, como si nada hubiera sucedido. Y un día, al acabar la limpieza, bajó al local sin aliento, sudorosa y, sin embargo, satisfecha: «¡Uf!, es increíble la falta que le hacían a la casa estos trabajos». Esch preguntó distraído: «¿Cuándo se arregló por última vez?», pero de repente comprendió que esto había tenido que ser con motivo de la boda con Hentjen; dio un porrazo a la mesa haciendo tintinear los vasos, y gritó: «¡Se pinta la jaula cada vez que se encierra en ella un nuevo pájaro!». Y poco faltó para que le diera a ella una bofetada allí mismo, en medio del local. Estaba harto de dejarse coger por la nuca y de que le obligaran a torcer la cabeza, de tener que mirar una y otra vez hacia el pasado. Y además ella le exigía que la cortejase; pues, en lo referente a la boda, no parecía tener prisa. Por dondequiera se imponía, implacablemente, lo habitual. Y se veía con bastante claridad que a través de aquella comodidad nueva y a través de aquella blandura, se filtraba una ancha pincelada de

sedentarismo, y todo daba a entender que ella tenía la intención de reemprender su vida igual que antes y de continuar así para siempre; además parecía como si pretendiera reducir al amor y al amante conjuntamente a un adorno secundario, a una especie de pintura en la casa de su vida. E incluso ella intentaba suprimir de nuevo aquella familiaridad semioficial que le había otorgado como una cierta garantía de su unión. Cuando él iba a Duisburg para controlar las cuentas de Teltscher, ella no le dedicaba ni una palabra de agradecimiento, y si él alguna vez la invitaba a acompañarlo, replicaba que esto era una exigencia y que dejaba a su elección el quedarse o no: pues él propiamente pertenecía allá.

¡Mamá Hentjen tenía razón! ¡También esta vez! Quedaba demostrado que él, en su casa, era simplemente un huérfano tolerado, un extraño, alguien con quien no era posible ningún tipo de comunicación. ¡Y en consecuencia ella no podía tener razón! Y esto era tal vez lo más irritante. Pues tras las aparentemente justas negociaciones, tras los aparentemente justos castigos, asomaba de nuevo el viejo y absurdo temor de que también él —¡él, August Esch!— pudiera buscar en la boda únicamente el dinero. Esto se vio claramente cuando llegaron los documentos de la hipoteca; mamá Hentjen los hojeó bastante rato con aire ofendido, y al fin dijo en tono de reproche: «Es una lástima que figuren esos intereses tan altos… Yo lo habría podido pagar perfectamente del dinero de mi libreta de ahorros». Sus palabras demostraban con diáfana claridad que ella poseía reservas secretas y que prefería mantenerlas ocultas, aceptando incluso una hipoteca, antes de permitirle a él que les echara una ojeada. Sí, esta mujer era así. Ella no había aprendido nada, no sabía nada del reino de la redención ni quería saberlo tampoco. Y la vida nueva era para ella una expresión vacía. ¡Oh, sí!, ella pretendía volver a aquella forma comercial y magistral del amor a la que él se había rendido y que, no obstante, se sentía incapaz de continuar soportando; era un círculo vicioso del que no podía escapar. Ineludible e inmutable se erguía lo que anteriormente había tenido realidad. Intangible. Incluso aunque se destruyera toda la ciudad —los muertos siempre son los más poderosos.

Y entonces apareció Lohberg. Se mostró desconfiado, porque se le había pagado únicamente el capital y no los beneficios previstos. A Esch solo le faltaban exigencias de este tipo. Sin embargo cuando aquel idiota, un poco cohibido aunque con aire de orgullosa satisfacción, insinuó que para ellos era importante hasta el último céntimo, porque Erna estaría pronto muy adelantada y había que pensar seriamente en la boda, a Esch le pareció oír como una voz del más allá, y supo que el sacrificio no había terminado todavía. La pequeña y mezquina esperanza de que este niño, del que él se sentía ya absuelto, pudiera ser, a pesar de todo, el hijo de Lohberg, se ahogó en la certeza inmaterial de una expiación, impuesta al amor perfecto por el que él había optado, impuesta a fin de que se expiara un ultraje en el que rebullía amenazador a la muerte, fulminándolos con la maldición de la esterilidad, mientras que aquel hijo concebido en el pecado y sin amor nacería inevitablemente. Y aunque él estaba muy furioso con mamá Hentjen, que lo ignoraba todo y que únicamente .pensaba en pintar su casa en lugar de compartir con él su pavor, anheló ardientemente este tipo de expiación, y sintió de nuevo el fuerte deseo de que mamá Hentjen levantara el brazo para matarle. A pesar de todo, tuvo que felicitar a Lohberg, y mientras le estrechaba la mano le dijo: «Los beneficios se pagarán en la medida de lo posible… como regalo de bautismo». ¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer? Se pasó la mano por el pelo corto y tieso y le quedó en la palma una sensación de frescor y picazón. Por Lohberg se enteró también de que Ilona se trasladaría muy pronto a Duisburg. Y decidió que a partir del mes próximo los libros de Teltscher tenían que ser enviados por correo para su revisión todos los primeros de mes.

¿Qué más se podía hacer? Efectivamente todo estaba en orden. Erna tendría un hijo legítimo y él se casaría con mamá Hentjen y el local sería pintado y revestido de linóleo marrón. Y nadie se figuraba todo lo que se ocultaba tras estas apariencias hermosas y dulces, nadie sabía quién había hecho aquel niño que llevaría el nombre de Lohberg, y que el amor perfecto dentro del cual él había querido encontrar una salvación no era más que un fraude, una estafa descarada para encubrir que él aquí se movía como un sucesor X, un sucesor cualquiera del sastre, yendo de un lado para otro dentro de la jaula, como aquel que piensa en una libertad total y en la huida y solo consigue agarrarse a los barrotes. La oscuridad era cada vez mayor y la niebla nunca se disiparía al otro lado del océano.

Ahora huía con frecuencia de aquella casa que se había vuelto para él estrecha y extraña. Vagaba por los malecones, contemplaba las hileras de tinglados y observaba los barcos que se deslizaban lentamente río abajo. Iba al puente sobre el Rin, caminaba dando traspiés hasta la prefectura de policía, hasta el edificio de la ópera, y desembocaba casi siempre en un jardín público. Quedarse de pie sobre un banco —teniendo en frente a las muchachas de los tamboriles— y cantar, sí, eso era tal vez lo mejor, entonar el canto del alma prisionera que alcanza su libertad por la fuerza del amor redentor. Puede que tuvieran razón aquellos idiotas del Ejército de Salvación, que lo más importante fuera encontrar el camino del amor auténtico y perfecto. Incluso la antorcha de la libertad puede que no alumbrara lo suficiente para conducir a la redención ya que, pese a todos los posibles viajes a Italia o a América, no había sido liberado. Precisamente con trucos fraudulentos no se arregla nada, uno sigue siendo huérfano, permanece de pie sobre la nieve temblando de frío, esperando que la gracia del amor se digne descender dulcemente sobre él. Entonces, sí, entonces es posible que también descienda el milagro, el milagro de la consumación perfecta. Regreso al hogar del hijo huérfano. Milagro de una duplicación del mundo y del destino —y el hijo por quien aquel se había marchado no sería el hijo de

Erna, sino el de aquella que, a pesar de todo, llevaría en su seno la auténtica vida nueva—. Pronto tendremos nieve, nieve blanda y esponjosa. Y el alma prisionera será liberada, ¡aleluya!, se erguirá sobre un banco, muy por encima de aquel que antes estaba más elevado. Y mentalmente pronunció por primera vez el nombre de pila de aquella que llegaría a ser madre gracias a él: Gertrud.

Cuando llegó a casa, escrutó el rostro de la mujer. La cara tenía una expresión amable y sus labios enumeraban fielmente lo que había cocinado por la mañana. Y como August Esch no sentía apetito, se escabulló. Le daba horror; sabía con certeza ineludible que el seno de aquella mujer había sido inmolado a la muerte, o, peor todavía, que estaba engendrando un monstruo. Estaba demasiado seguro de la maldición, plenamente convencido del asesinato que el muerto había perpetrado y seguiría perpetrando contra aquella mujer. De nuevo la pregunta le producía tanto dolor que no se atrevía a formularla… ¿Se les había negado el derecho a tener hijos o era que simplemente ellos se habían entregado tan solo al placer? La acuciante cólera que sentía contra mamá Hentjen aumentó y de nuevo fue totalmente incapaz de llamarla con el mismo nombre con que la había llamado el difunto; sí, se juró a sí mismo no pronunciar aquel nombre hasta que ella no hubiera comprendido de qué se trataba. Pero ella no comprendía. Ella lo acogía con suavidad y realismo, y le dejaba abandonado a su soledad. Él se esforzaba en transigir con el destino: tal vez no dependía del hijo, sino que lo esencial era la buena disposición de ella, y él esperaba esta buena disposición. Pero también en esto le dejaba ella solo, y cuando él, para animarla, insinuaba que después de la boda querrían tener hijos, ella contestaba simplemente, secamente, objetivamente: «sí», pero lo que él esperaba ella no se lo daba y durante sus noches de amor nunca le gritó que le hiciera un hijo. Esch la golpeaba, pero ella no comprendía por qué y callaba. Hasta que él llegó a la conclusión de que esto tampoco servía de nada; pues había surgido, inevitablemente, la duda de si ella habría implorado también un hijo al señor Hentjen, y ese hijo, cuyo padre él ansiaba ser, habría estado entonces en el seno de ella de manera tan fortuita como si hubiera procedido del semen de Hentjen. La mujer no puede proporcionar ninguna ayuda al hombre cuando a este le agobia la tortura de la duda ante lo indemostrable. Y cuanto más se torturaba él, más tenía ella que dejar a las cosas que se sucedieran sin comprender por qué: no obstante, era solo débilmente, era, por así decirlo, simbólica y alusivamente que él la golpeaba. La sublevación de Esch estaba perdiendo fuerzas.

Él reconocía que en el seno de lo real jamás podía producirse el logro absoluto, cada vez veía más claramente que la lejanía más apartada radicaba también en lo real, que toda huida carecía de sentido, así como la búsqueda de la salvación ante la muerte, el logro absoluto y la libertad; e incluso el hijo, aun saliendo vivo del cuerpo de la madre, no significa nada más que el grito casual del placer en el que fue engendrado, grito que se extingue y desvanece en el tiempo, y que nada prueba de la existencia del amante al que iba dirigido. Hijo ajeno a uno mismo, tan ajeno como el sonido extinguido, ajeno como el pasado, ajeno como el muerto y como la muerte, muñeco de madera vacío. Pues lo terrenal es inmutable, aunque a veces cambie en apariencia, y si todo el mundo naciera de nuevo no lograría el estado de inocencia a pesar de la muerte del redentor, al menos no se lograría antes de que se alcanzara el final del tiempo.

Si bien tales consideraciones no estaban muy claras, bastaron para que Esch se decidiera a instalarse, en su vida terrenal, en Colonia, se decidiera a buscar una colocación digna y a atender sus negocios. Gracias a los buenos certificados que poseía, encontró un puesto de mayor categoría y responsabilidad que el que había tenido anteriormente y reconquistó de nuevo toda la admiración y el entusiasmo que mamá Hentjen tenía reservados para él. Ella hizo revestir la taberna de linóleo marrón y, ahora que el peligro de la emigración había sido descartado definitivamente, empezó a hablar de las quimeras de América. Él condescendía en ello, en parte porque tenía la impresión de que a ella le gustaban tales conversaciones y en parte por sentido del deber: pues aunque él no llegara nunca a ver América, jamás abandonaría el camino que conduce allá, no volvería nunca atrás aunque lo invisible le persiguiera con la lanza a punto de herirle, y un saber que oscilaba entre el presentimiento y el deseo le decía que este camino solo era símbolo y presagio de otro más alto que era necesario seguir en la realidad y del que el primer camino solo era un reflejo terrenal, oscilante e inseguro como la imagen que se refleja en un estanque turbio. Todo esto no estaba muy claro para Esch, e incluso la palabra espiritual en la que habría que buscar la consecución de todo, y lo absoluto, no estaba a su alcance. Pero él reconocía que era pura casualidad el que las sumas de las columnas concordaran, y por eso se consideraba con derecho a observar lo terrenal desde un peldaño superior, como desde un castillo iluminado que se elevase por encima del llano, encerrado en sí mismo frente al mundo y, no obstante, abierto a él, reflejando su imagen, y a veces parecía como si todo lo dicho, lo hecho, lo hablado y lo sucedido no fueran más que una escena representada en un escenario mal iluminado, una representación que se olvida y que nunca ha tenido lugar, algo que ha existido, algo a lo que nadie puede agarrarse sin aumentar el sufrimiento terrenal. La plenitud, por tanto, jamás tiene lugar en lo real, pero el camino del anhelo y de la libertad es infinito y nunca podrá ser hollado, es estrecho y tortuoso como el del sonámbulo, aunque se trate del camino que conduce a los brazos abiertos de la patria y a su pecho viviente. Así pues Esch se sentía un extraño en su amor, y, en cambio, estaba más unido a lo terrenal que antes; nada tenía importancia y en realidad todo permanecía al margen de lo terrenal aunque, para ser fiel a la justicia, todavía quedaba mucho que hacer en favor de Ilona. Hablaba con mamá Hentjen de la América libre, de la venta de la taberna y de la boda, como

se habla a un niño al que se deja gustosamente que haga su voluntad; a veces la podía llamar de nuevo Gertrurd, pese a que ella, en aquellas noches en que él se sumergía dentro de ella, se le aparecía sin nombre. Caminaban de la mano, cada cual por su camino, distinto y sin fin. Cuando se hubieron casado y hubieron malvendido la taberna a un precio excesivamente bajo, estos hechos fueron como etapas en el camino del símbolo, etapas, no obstante, en el camino del acercamiento a lo elevado y eterno, algo que, de no ser Esch un librepensador, incluso habría podido llamarse divino. Pero él sabía que, a pesar de todo, todos nosotros, en la tierra, debemos seguir nuestra senda apoyados en muletas.

IV

Cuando quebró el teatro de Duisburg, y Teltscher e Ilona estuvieron a punto de quedarse sin tener qué comer, Esch y su mujer invirtieron todo cuanto les quedaba en el negocio del teatro y muy pronto perdieron definitivamente el dinero. No obstante, Esch encontró una colocación como jefe contable en una gran empresa industrial de su país natal, Luxemburgo, y su mujer le admiró todavía más. Siguieron marchando de la mano y se amaron recíprocamente. En alguna ocasión él la golpeaba aún, pero cada vez con menos frecuencia, y finalmente dejó de golpearla por completo.

1. Robert Musil, *Diarios*, Barcelona, DeBolsillo, 2004, pág. 226. Sobre Musil, gran escritor y algo receloso, son interesantes los comentarios de M. Reich-Ranicki (*Sieben Wegbereiter*, Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004) sobre su empeño narrativo inacabable en *El hombre sin atributos*.

2. El relieve de esta figura, que el propio Broch abonaba, lo consolidó la crítica de manera casi inmediata. Así, en su antología de los fragmentos más significativos de la prosa brochiana, Harald Binde (*Die Heimkehr*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Bücherei, 1962, pp. 27-48) seleccionó las páginas de *Pasenow* y *Esch* en las que interviene Bertrand.

Biografía

Hermann Broch (1886-1951) nació en Viena en una familia acomodada de origen judío. Cursó estudios de ingeniería textil y trabajó largo tiempo en la fábrica de su padre. En 1928 abandonó sus actividades en la industria para dedicarse por entero a la literatura y a sus estudios de filosofía, matemáticas y psicología. Perseguido por la Gestapo en 1938, logró salir de la cárcel gracias a la intervención de algunas personalidades, entre ellas James Joyce, y huir primero a Inglaterra y luego a Estados Unidos, donde falleció en la ciudad de New Haven. Aparte de una importante obra como ensayista, en el campo de la narrativa dejó varias obras capitales para la literatura contemporánea: *La muerte de Virgilio*, *Los inocentes* y la trilogía de Los sonámbulos, que, escrita entre 1931 y 1932, incluye *Pasenow o el romanticismo*, *Esch o la anarquía* y *Huguenau o el realismo*.

Título original: *Esch oder die Anarchie*

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HERMANN BROCH

Huguenau o el realismo

DEBOLSILLO

Huguenau o el realismo
Hermann Broch

Traducción de
María Ángeles Grau

DEBOLSILLO

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Acerca de *Los sonámbulos*

HERMANN BROCH O EL PACIFISTA IRÓNICO

Como una piel contraída por la invasión súbita del frío exterior ante el sobresalto interior, Viena despertó estremecida —pero crepuscularmente lúcida— ante el impacto atronador, y gaseado, de la Primera Guerra europea. El siglo XX iniciaba en su caso el paradigma del principio y el fin de una era que en su espacio urbano e intelectual materializaba las líneas de T. S. Eliot: «*In my Beginnig is my End, in my End is my Beginning*».

Viena había capitalizado la ensoñación patricia europea, concentrada en el ámbito centrooriental del Viejo Continente: once nacionalidades, etnias variadas y confesiones religiosas de difícil o quimérica convivencia. Bajo el imperio, o la inercia latente de un poder con la sola fuerza de su declive, la armonía de un mundo con tres ciudades imperiales (Praga y Budapest además de las que asumía una titularidad hipotecada) no era sino el presentimiento de su desintegración.

Roto, o transformado si se prefiere, el mundo no era ya el mítico y paterno-familiar del nombre de Francisco José —sesenta y ocho años de mando, con bastón, y no de mando los últimos—; las nuevas realidades iban a imponerse. Para el vienés, esa figura que concentra avances científicos, preocupación minuciosa por el lenguaje y conciencia de la crisis que en los cambios mismos de su espacio se manifiesta, el latido de la alarma supone un llamamiento irrenunciable a la reflexión.

Las ambiciones de poder y sus resabios iban a redibujar con sus tropelías, o a restablecer con sus reivindicaciones, un mapa que seguiría quebrando y recosiendo a lo largo del siglo XX las costuras de unas fronteras tan lábiles como lo requirieran la tensión y el tesón —o el empecinamiento— de sus identidades.

Hermann Broch —un «autor a pesar suyo» (*Dichter wider Willen*), como lo definió su amiga Hannah Arendt— vivió práctica y literariamente como ingeniero y hombre de empresa hasta pasar a su vocación artística, el clima humanístico de Viena, pero también la vanidad de sus varias correcciones oficiales, el exceso de ornamentación como disfraz de su vacío. En su ensayo sobre «Hofmannsthal y su tiempo» (incluido en *Poesía e investigación*, Barcelona, Barral, 1974), traza un diagnóstico preciso y elocuente al respecto. El sentido crítico que revelan las páginas en torno al gran poeta y su ciudad, escritas hacia el final de su vida en Estados Unidos, presidía ya las líneas de su trilogía *Los sonámbulos*. De 1888 a 1918, y al frágil amparo del Romanticismo, sitúa en la Prusia finisecular, y en las conflictivas zonas industriales de Alemania, el teatro de unas circunstancias y personajes representativos de un común escenario germánico. No descuida algún paraíso provisional contemplativo, y aun abismático, para mostrar el lado de sombra que gravita en sus desapoderados protagonistas, y les confiere un relieve superior que ellos mismos ignoran.

La especulación a propósito de paisajes mentales (que parecen ávidos de hablar al alma) y el registro de las realidades de un capitalismo sin contemplaciones, con progresos tan evidentes como sus crímenes, conforman esta trilogía. Hermann Broch, vienés, sensible, auscultador de los vientos del espíritu, dialoga narrativamente con el lector, y lo sitúa en una Alemania predominante y aglutinadora que por su experiencia empresarial conocía bien. *Los sonámbulos* conforman una reflexión ejemplar para comprender, más allá de las geografías estrictas del texto, el devenir de una Europa que, después de 1945 —con Dachau y Auschwitz y Coventry y Dresde—, parece, sobre todo, una promesa incumplida.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO
Barcelona, Sant Vicenç de Montalt,
marzo de 2006

PRÓLOGO

HUGUENAU O LA MORAL ABOLIDA

Con *Huguenau o el realismo* toca a su fin la trilogía *Los sonámbulos*. Los hilos que tejieron el romanticismo de Pasenow y el anarquismo visceral de Esch, se reanudan en Huguenau con la configuración del pragmatismo y de la desmoralización consecuentes con el final de la Primera Guerra Mundial. Sin compromisos políticos o religiosos, y enfrentado a quienes los representan con fervor sectario o nostalgia de los ceremoniales del honor, Huguenau es la figura emblemática de la nueva era: pocas ideas y muchas ganas de triunfar bastan para desenvolverse en una situación sin referencias morales substantivas. En registros distintos y complementarios, Pasenow y Huguenau como polos extremos, y Esch y Bertrand como mediaciones conflictivas, desembocan en el narrar del narrarse el autor mientras escribe. La continuidad temática es evidente, pero no lo es menos la ruptura formal en *Huguenau*. Aquí la acción no obedece al seguimiento lineal, sino al sucederse contrastado del acontecer.

Al situar este tercer volumen en 1918, con el trastorno de un armisticio vejatorio para Alemania, desde entonces abocada a puntuales vértigos revolucionarios, Broch precipita el haz de tensiones latentes en los dos volúmenes anteriores. La sucesión argumental se prolonga a través del mezquino protagonista y de sus estrategias. Pero no es tanto el realismo como deuda narrativa del siglo XIX lo que caracteriza al texto, sino la denuncia del auge capitalista en el siglo XX. Adaptable a cualquier situación, el desorden inmediato a la posguerra le ofrece a Huguenau la jungla perfecta para actuar a sus anchas. Ante el romántico Pasenow (de nuevo en uniforme como comandante en plaza frente a un inaudito presente) y el convulso Esch (ahora director de un periódico local y sublimado en el sectarismo religioso), representa la superación, bien rasa por cierto, de la tríada. La incomunicación de los personajes, que no resuelve el trato habitual, borra las huellas de algún ideal pasado y tiñe de tristes presagios el futuro.

Solo el positivismo parecería prevalecer en este esquema recapitulador. Pero Broch ambiciona el trazado de un panorama mucho más complejo y trascendente. Su afán de totalidad expresiva quiere integrar dimensiones heterogéneas y atraer afluentes irreconciliables al caudal de una posible conciliación extrema como la que reflejan, sensitivas y generosas, las últimas páginas del libro.

Para ello estructura el telar narrativo con historias diversas y excursos ensayísticos, fragmentos aforísticos y acendramientos poemáticos. Conforma así un panorama de secuencias o intercalaciones que, deudoras de géneros contrapuestos, aspiran a vertebrar una exigente afinidad de sentido. Pero el empeño es difícil, pues consiste en lograr la imagen coherente de un mundo con garantías escasas de fraternidad humana, y aun de armonía. Broch no renunció jamás a lo que puede parecer una quimera, reparadora o previsora, al fin y al cabo, de las sombras que se cernían sobre sus páginas mismas en los años (1928-1930) de ascensión irresistible del nazismo.

Más acá de las aspiraciones y el calado reflexivo y filosófico del libro, sus numerosos capítulos muestran existencias atormentadas o nostálgicas, escépticas o sectarias, en un mosaico crítico en muchos aspectos anticipador de temores y esperanzas asociables a una posteridad, que es todavía este hoy. Ironía y melancolía marchan fundidas, y sus ecos resonarán en todo lector de novelas que —semejantes a esta— aspiren a una literatura entendida como experiencia vital a transmitir.

A la relación de personajes conocidos se suma la de quienes amplían y diversifican el argumento y el teatro de los hechos. La narración se corresponde aquí con existencias, agonías, frustraciones y crímenes o lutos en una calidoscópica amalgama. Pero no basta la extensión sucesiva de lo narrativo, sino que surgen comentarios referentes al curso mismo de la relación. Su carácter experimental lo demuestra la distinta disposición de sus elementos, pero su aportación decisiva viene determinada por el compromiso ético del autor frente a su época. Otro rasgo es el lirismo acuciante y complementario que desprende la prosa y culmina en la estilización específica y concluyente del epílogo.

El considerable aumento en número de páginas de la tercera parte con respecto a las dos anteriores pone en evidencia el cúmulo ya aludido de experiencias, motivos y teorías que el volumen congrega. De la intensidad mental de ciertos momentos a la traslación figurativa que Broch proyecta en otros (como en la segunda parte hiciera con el diálogo en Badenweiler entre Esch y Eduard von Bertrand), la trilogía entraña además la dramática confrontación del hombre con su tiempo, su poesía y su prosa, su música y las disonancias que la estimulan, la disolución épica en fragmentos que ni son escenario de figuras monumentales ni suponen una oferta de amable entretenimiento.

De modo que el lector se introduce en el ritmo de un novelar historias que se interrumpen y retornan,

entreveradas de ensayos y sentencias. Broch, situado por Milan Kundera[1] entre los escritores decisivos —de Rabelais y Cervantes a Sterne, Flaubert, Tolstoi y Musil— para el devenir (polifónico lo llama) de la narrativa hasta el siglo xx, experimentaba, como tantos autores de los años veinte y treinta del siglo pasado, con la literatura dentro de la literatura. Su proceder enlaza o sigue propuestas de la época, como las de James Joyce —cuya influencia acusa en el ensayo *James Joyce y el presente*—, John Dos Passos y Alfred Döblin, o el ya mencionado Musil. Pero su singularidad reside en una muy acusada conciencia de supeditar los recursos estéticos a sus inquietudes éticas y religiosas; al afán de denunciar las transformaciones y extravíos de la Europa de entreguerras. En su tono admonitorio hay algo de edificante que tal vez desconcierte al deseoso de saborear la sola literatura, pero precisamente por ello supone una llamada de atención cuya gravedad resuena todavía. Y sus ecos pertinentes emplazan al lector de un tiempo que sigue siendo el nuestro.

La devastación subsiguiente a la guerra —con un armisticio en 1918 que es apenas un final— se diversifica en personajes como el lugarteniente Jaretzki, amputado de un brazo y que ahoga en la ebriedad su desesperación y escepticismo. Dialoga con enfermeras y médicos, menciona el gas ante un comandante Pasenow inadvertido de los letales avances científicos en las trincheras, y acusa así el abandono de tantos. Dos historias, la de Hannah Wendling y la del soldado de reserva Ludwig Gödicke, trazan una simetría o complementariedad tácita. En la primera, la soledad y el extrañamiento de la protagonista hacia su entorno se liberan momentáneamente en la sexualidad, pero el vacío interior la lleva a la destrucción. En cuanto a Gödicke, supone una invención tan peregrina como sarcástica, una especie de broma sórdida y no menos brutal que la guerra. Gödicke experimenta una resurrección inusitada; su boca, «abierta para gritar, estaba llena de tierra». Los soldados que intentan reanimarlo tras una apuesta para cerciorarse de si está vivo o muerto, se indignan frente «al acertijo de su vida, que en este caso era el acertijo de su muerte». Esta figura, a fuer de extremada y simbólica del absurdo bélico, significa una caracterización narrativa ejemplar del siglo xx. Resume, además, uno de los motivos rectores del pensamiento brochiano, el de pulsar la delgada línea que separa, y une, vida y muerte. (Y supone asumir el riesgo de atisbar el límite en el punto inasible de su fuga.)

Los fragmentos intercalados entre la galería de personajes (aquí muy poblada, a través de compromisos y enredos de los protagonistas Esch, Pasenow y Huguenau) adoptan el tono de tratados al margen del devenir argumental. Son excursos filosóficos, apuntes y exégesis de carácter religioso, que funcionan a manera de criba de los ideales y obsesiones recurrentes en los personajes. Una evaluación crítica, paralela a sus comportamientos, que conforma así un panorama transversal de vida e ideas entremezclados en el fluir cada vez más intenso de la trilogía.

La pauta ensayística destaca en «Degradación de los valores» (donde la vocación de entender la literatura como factor cognoscitivo es evidente) y en «Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín». En este, el yo explícito del autor —transferido a un Bertrand Müller que evoca al suicidado Eduard von Bertrand del segundo volumen— subraya la continuidad de los hilos que sustentan la trama conjunta. Reaparece con él la dimensión del esteta que sabe de la complejidad de personas y circunstancias, pero no se implica. Su actitud, dialogante y de mucho mayor interés que las polarizadas de Pasenow y Esch, no le excusa, sin embargo, de limitarse a ser un observador.

Más allá del espiritualismo, entendido como doble fondo enriquecedor de algunos personajes, y del registro puntual del materialismo e indiferencia de la época cuyo paradigma idóneo es Huguenau, Broch vislumbra una mínima esperanza. Sus especulaciones sobre el cristianismo y la valoración del catolicismo como un cohesionador de conciencias, resultan ser una suerte de adiós, con tintes de sobria melancolía, a un pasado que tanto más evidencia la dispersión de un existir carente de reciprocidad y compartimentado.

Comentario aparte merece la «musarañería» de detalles de autor, desde sus guiños al lector cómplice —ese Huguenau que alguna vez debió de ser Haguenau, con lo que ya se ve dónde ha ido a parar una figura de los *Nibelungos*— hasta los excursos sobre arquitectura, música y lecturas personales, y los muy significativos sobre la amistad de Bertrand con el mundo judío, las ironías sobre Alemania y la doblez del protagonista, indiferente como germano, indiferente como francés. El conjunto de estos detalles desvelan al vienés Hermann Broch, con sus descripciones paisajísticas minuciosas en la estela de un Stifter y su conciencia de la crisis del lenguaje, tenso entre su afán de exactitud y la resistencia de lo real a ser expresado plenamente por el lenguaje. Su revisión de la Viena de Hofmannsthal, llevada a cabo en sus últimos años en Estados Unidos, revelará un núcleo de preocupaciones análogas a las que se desprenden de la trilogía.[2]

Huguenau o el realismo (o sea, el realismo del pragmático) concluye en una afirmación de vida estimulante, construida al ritmo de la inteligencia emocional, solidaria y lúcida. *Solo el corazón es lo real* (*Nur das Herz ist das Wirkliche*) fue el título de la primera antología que de sus textos reunió el autor austríaco Ernst Schönwiese. *El regreso* (*Die Heimkehr*) fue el que eligió para la suya el crítico alemán Harald Binde. Si la primera alude al empeño humano de solidaridad que caracterizó al autor, la segunda incide en una inmanencia religiosa cuyo más allá es el inmediato cielo imprevisible de todos los días. Y Hannah

Arendt, en una semblanza precisa, habla de cómo «... Broch se aferraba a su temprana y básica convicción cristiana de que la muerte y la mortalidad están arraigadas al mundo, pero la inmortalidad y la eternidad están ancladas al yo, de modo que la vida que nos parece mortal en verdad es inmortal y el mundo que nos parece eterno es, en realidad, víctima de la muerte».[3]

Huguenau se abisma en un desenlace de acendrado tono poemático, irreductible en un hombre, sobre todo y básicamente escritor, que desoyó a Hannah Arendt. La autora de *Los orígenes del totalitarismo* solo recordaba a su amigo que él era, por encima de todo, poeta. Pero el escritor obedecía a un dictado interior que, desde la literatura, quería llegar no solo al conocimiento sino a un obrar que jamás se desentendiera del drama humano. Las páginas finales convocan al lector en la «llamada al desamparado»:

> … la voz que une lo que fue con lo que todavía ha de ser, la soledad con todas las soledades, y no es la voz del miedo ni la llamada del Juicio... es la voz del hombre y de los pueblos, la voz del consuelo y de la esperanza, la voz de la bondad inmediata: «¡No te hagas mal alguno, que todos estamos aquí!».

Así concluye el epílogo de la trilogía, un texto y a la vez un documento imprescindible para comprender el siglo, y comprenderse en él. Pues toda acusación —Bertrand como eco del autor así lo indica— es autoacusación.[4]

El interés en torno a Broch y su visión del mundo no cesa desde la conmemoración de los cincuenta años de su muerte. Naturalmente en Yale, New Haven, que guarda el archivo de su obra en marcha —ensayos sobre política internacional y el futuro de las Humanidades—, se celebró en 2001 un simposio en su honor,[5] al que se unieron los de Viena, Stuttgart, Tokio y una sesión del MLA (Modern Language Association) en Nueva Orleans. En 2003 se celebraron dos en Viena y otro en San Diego, California. Y en Dortmund, del 24 al 26 de junio de 2004, cuyas sesiones llevaban por título «Política, derechos del hombre —¿y literatura?». Tanto la regularidad de los simposios (el siguiente en Hungría en 2006), como la variedad temática, de influencias y relaciones literarias (de Hofmannsthal a Canetti, y de Bernhard a Handke, entre otros) de la obra de Broch nos hablan de un legado intelectual cuya vigencia sigue palpitando en la constancia de los intereses que despierta.

LLUÍS IZQUIERDO

I

Huguenau, cuyos antepasados muy probablemente se llamaban Hagenau antes de que el país alsaciano fuera ocupado por las tropas de Condé en el año 1692, tenía, desde todos los puntos de vista, el aspecto de un teutón burgués. Era bajo y rechoncho; llevaba gafas desde su juventud o, para ser más exactos, desde que estudió comercio en Schlettstadt, y, cuando estalló la guerra, época en que se aproximaba a los treinta años, de su rostro y también de su carácter había desaparecido todo rasgo juvenil. Sus negocios radicaban en la región de Baden y en Würtenberg; regentaba una filial de la empresa paterna (André Huguenau, textiles, Colmar, Alsacia), pero también trabajaba por su cuenta o como representante de fábricas alsacianas a cuyos productos daba él salida en dichos sectores. Entre los de su ramo tenía fama de ser un comerciante emprendedor, prudente y sólido.

La verdad es que, gracias a su ética de comerciante, sentía mayor inclinación por los negocios ilícitos que por el oficio de las armas. No obstante, en 1917, y a pesar de que se hiciera caso omiso de su pronunciada miopía, aceptó sin rechistar lo que suele denominarse llamamiento a filas. Desde luego, durante el período de instrucción en Fulda, todavía realizó uno que otro negocio con tabaco, pero no tardó en cansarse. Y no solo porque el servicio militar le agotara tanto que quedase inhabilitado para otras cosas, sino porque resultaba sencillamente más agradable no tener nada en que pensar. Por otra parte, ello evocaba en él sus lejanos tiempos de escolar: el alumno Huguenau (Wilhelm) todavía recordaba la fiesta de despedida del instituto de Schlettstadt y las palabras con que el director había lanzado a aquellos jóvenes entonces entusiastas del comercio a enfrentarse con la vida, vida en la que hasta ahora se había defendido muy bien y que, por el momento, tenía que volver a abandonar en aras de un nuevo período de aprendizaje. De nuevo se encontraba sumido en una larga serie de obligaciones olvidadas a lo largo de tantos años, se le trataba como a un escolar, recibía reprimendas y, frente a los aseos y su atmósfera colectiva, adoptaba idéntica actitud que en los años escolares; también la manduca centraba de nuevo el interés, y las normas de respeto y el celo ambicioso en que se hallaba involucrado imprimían a todo un evidente sello de infantilismo. Además, se encontraba instalado en un edificio que había sido escuela y, antes de dormirse, podía ver ante sus ojos la doble hilera de bombillas con pantallas verdes y blancas y una pizarra que había quedado olvidada en el aula. Durante este período, las épocas de juventud y de guerra fueron convirtiéndose de modo confuso en una unidad indisoluble, e incluso cuando el batallón se dirigió por fin al frente entonando canciones infantiles y rodeado de llamativas banderitas, cuando en Colonia y en Lieja se acuartelaron de manera primitiva, el soldado de infantería Huguenau no logró apartar de su mente la impresión de estar participando en una excursión escolar.

Una tarde su compañía fue conducida a la posición de combate. Era una línea de construcciones atrincheradas, a las que era necesario acercarse a través de largas galerías protegidas. En los refugios reinaba una suciedad sin parangón: el suelo se hallaba cubierto de salivazos, secos o recientes, entreverados de tabaco; en las paredes se veían innumerables chorretones de orina, y resultaba imposible averiguar si hedía a cadáver o a defecación. Huguenau estaba demasiado cansado para hacerse realmente cargo de lo que veía u olía. No obstante, mientras corrían al trote en fila de a uno a través de las trincheras, lo más probable es que todos ellos se sintieran desposeídos de la protección que ofrecían la camaradería y la solidaridad y, aunque se hubieran vuelto insensibles a la total falta de higiene y no echaran de menos el elemento civilizado con que el hombre intenta defenderse del olor a muerte y a putrefacción, y aunque la superación del asco sea siempre el primer peldaño para ascender al heroísmo —de donde se desprende una extraña relación con el amor—, y aunque el pánico se había convertido para muchos durante los largos años de la guerra en la atmósfera normal e instalaran sus petates entre bromas y juramentos, ninguno de ellos ignoraba sin embargo que había sido empujado —como hombre solitario con vida y muerte solitarias— hasta aquel absurdo, un absurdo que ellos no podían comprender sino, a lo sumo, calificar de guerra de mierda.

Por aquel entonces, los distintos Estados Mayores habían comunicado que en el sector de Flandes reinaba una calma absoluta. La compañía a la que relevaron también les aseguró que no pasaba nada. Pese a ello, así que anocheció comenzó un fuego cruzado de artillería lo suficientemente inquietante como para acabar con el sueño de los recién llegados. Huguenau, sentado en una especie de catre y con dolor de vientre, tardó un buen rato en darse cuenta de que todas sus articulaciones crujían y temblaban. A los demás no les iban mejor las cosas. Había quien sollozaba. En cambio, los veteranos, como es lógico, se reían: ya se acostumbrarían, aquello solamente era una broma que todas las noches se gastaban entre sí las

baterías y no significaba nada; y, sin preocuparse más de aquellos gallinas, rompieron a roncar en pocos minutos.

A Huguenau le entraron ganas de protestar: todo aquello iba contra las convenciones. Se sentía atrapado y se encontraba tan mal que, necesitando tomar el aire, en cuanto sus rodillas dejaron de temblar se deslizó sobre sus piernas entumecidas hasta la entrada del refugio, se acurrucó sobre una caja y clavó su mirada vacía en el cielo, que parecía cuajado de fuegos artificiales. La imagen de un hombre volando entre nubes anaranjadas con la mano levantada se le aparecía una y otra vez. Entonces se acordó de Colmar y de una vez en que todos los de su clase fueron a visitar el museo, donde les aburrieron con numerosas explicaciones, pero, ante un cuadro, situado en el centro, como en un altar, él había sentido miedo: era una Crucifixión y a él no le gustaban las crucifixiones. Un par de años atrás había tenido que matar un domingo en Nüremberg entre dos visitas a sendos clientes y decidió visitar la cámara de las torturas. ¡Qué interesante había sido! También allí había muchísimos cuadros. En uno se veía a un hombre que, atado a una especie de camastro, esperaba, según rezaba la explicación, sufrir el suplicio de la rueda por haber matado a puñaladas en Sajonia a un pastor. Sobre el funcionamiento de la rueda podía uno informarse contemplando los restantes objetos de la exposición. El hombre tenía aspecto de buena persona y tan inimaginable resultaba que hubiera acribillado a cuchilladas a un pastor y que por ello estuviera condenado al suplicio de la rueda, como que uno tuviera que permanecer a la expectativa, rodeado de hedor de cadáveres y sentado en un catre. Seguro que aquel hombre también tenía dolor de vientre y que, al estar encadenado, tendría que ensuciarse encima. Huguenau escupió y dijo «*Merde*!», en francés.

Huguenau —la cabeza apoyada en un poste, el cuello del capote subido— seguía sentado a la entrada del refugio, como un centinela; ya no tenía frío, ni dormía ni vigilaba. La cámara de torturas y el refugio fueron sumergiéndose cada vez más profundamente en los colores algo sucios, aunque refulgentes, de aquel altar de Grünewald; y mientras allá afuera las ramas de los árboles elevaban sus brazos al cielo bajo la luz rutilante y anaranjada del fuego de los cañones y de los cohetes luminosos, un hombre con la mano levantada oscilaba en la resplandeciente cúpula que se abría.

Cuando empezó a apuntar el frío y gris amanecer, Huguenau se dio cuenta de que en los bordes de la trinchera había retazos de hierba y algunas margaritas tempranas. Se arrastró hacia fuera y se alejó. Sabía que podía ser abatido sin consideración alguna por las baterías inglesas y que podía atraer sobre sí los más desagradables insultos de los centinelas alemanes. Pero el mundo yacía bajo una especie de campana neumática —Huguenau no pudo evitar la imagen de una quesera—, el mundo se mostraba gris, agusanado y completamente muerto, sumido en un silencio inviolable.

II

Acariciado por el aire diáfano que anuncia la primavera, el desertor avanza desarmado a través de los campos de Bélgica. La prisa no le serviría de nada; más útil le resultará en cambio la cautelosa precaución; las armas no le protegerían. Por así decirlo, avanza como un hombre desnudo por entre la violencia. Su rostro despreocupado le protege más y mejor que las armas o la huida precipitada o la documentación falsa.

Los campesinos belgas son gentes suspicaces. Cuatro años de guerra no han ennoblecido su modo de ser. Han sufrido las consecuencias en su grano, sus patatas, sus caballos y sus vacas. Y cuando el que pretende refugiarse entre ellos es un desertor, lo miran con mayor desconfianza aún: pudiera tratarse del hombre que aporreó la puerta de su granja con la culata del fusil. Y aunque uno hable un francés aceptable y asegure que es alsaciano, en nueve de cada diez casos no le servirá de mucho. ¡Desdichado de aquel que cruza los campos como fugitivo en busca de ayuda! En cambio, el que, como Huguenau, tiene siempre a flor de labio la palabra justa y amable, o entra en la hacienda con expresión sonriente y cordial, ese sí obtendrá con facilidad permiso para acostarse en el henil y hasta es posible que, por la noche, se siente con la familia en la penumbra de la sala y cuente las atrocidades cometidas por los prusianos o lo que estos hicieron en Alsacia. Le escucharán y le aplaudirán; también recibirá una parte de los escasos y escondidos víveres y, si tiene suerte, cuando esté acostado en el heno recibirá la visita de alguna criada.

Claro que, en cualquier caso, siempre resultará más ventajoso conseguir asilo en una casa parroquial, y Huguenau no tardó en descubrir que la confesión era un buen medio para lograrlo. Se confesaba en francés y, con habilidad, mezclaba el pecado de haber roto su juramento de soldado con la narración de su lamentable destino. Desde luego no siempre resultaba fácil: una vez se topó con un párroco enjuto y de aspecto tan ascético y apasionado que, a la tarde siguiente de haberse confesado con él, dudaba si visitarlo o no. Cuando vio a aquel hombre de severo aspecto afanándose en su huerto con los trabajos propios de la cercana primavera, a punto estuvo de dar media vuelta y marcharse. Pero el sacerdote se le acercó y le ordenó con brusquedad: «Sígame». Lo condujo al interior de la casa parroquial y Huguenau quedó instalado en la buhardilla, donde permaneció una semana recibiendo una precaria comida.

Vestido con un blusón azul a fin de pasar inadvertido, trabajaba en el jardín. Le despertaban para la misa y le permitían comer en la mesa de la cocina, junto al taciturno párroco. No se habló de su deserción y, en conjunto, aquellos fueron unos días de prueba que no complacieron del todo a Huguenau. Ya había pensado incluso en volverle la espalda a aquel asilo, pese a su relativa seguridad, y proseguir su peligroso peregrinaje, cuando encontró en su cuarto —a los ocho días justos de haber llegado— un traje de paisano. El párroco le dijo que podía ponérselo y que era libre de irse o de quedarse, pero que no podía seguir alimentándolo porque el pan andaba muy escaso. Huguenau decidió continuar caminando y, cuando se disponía a expresarle su agradecimiento al clérigo, este le interrumpió: «*Haïssez les Prussiens et les ennemis de la sainte religion. Et que Dieu vous bénisse*». Alzó los dedos para bendecirle, trazó la señal de la cruz, y en su rostro, rostro anguloso de campesino, los ojos miraron con odio hacia una lejanía en la que probablemente se hallaban los prusianos y los protestantes.

Al salir de la casa parroquial, Huguenau comprendió con claridad que era preciso estructurar un metódico plan de fuga. Si hasta entonces se había acercado con frecuencia a los emplazamientos militares de importancia, donde podía pasar inadvertido entre los soldados, ahora esto ya no era factible. En el fondo, el traje de paisano le cohibía; era como una exhortación a que regresara a la paz y a la vida cotidiana, y le parecía una idiotez haber obedecido la orden del párroco. Había sido una torpe intromisión en su vida privada, vida privada por la que en verdad ya había pagado bastante. Aunque no se considerara precisamente como parte integrante del ejército imperial, sin embargo, como desertor que era, se sentía unido a dicho ejército de forma muy peculiar, de una forma negativa, podría decirse, y desde luego sí se sentía integrado en la guerra, guerra cuya existencia él aprobaba. Nunca soportó oír, en cantinas y tabernas, cómo la gente criticaba la guerra y los periódicos, o cómo afirmaba que los periódicos estaban comprados por Krupp para prolongar la guerra. Porque Wilhelm Huguenau no solo era un desertor sino también un comerciante y, como tal, admiraba a todos los fabricantes capaces de producir productos con los que los demás hombres podían comerciar. Así pues, si Krupp y los barones del carbón compraban los periódicos, estaban en su derecho —sabían lo que hacían—, como tenía derecho él a llevar uniforme mientras le apeteciera. Por tanto, nada hablaba en favor de regresar al país que había dejado atrás y al que, evidentemente, había querido enviarle el párroco, vestido de paisano; nada hablaba en favor de volver a una patria que venía a significar vida absurda y cotidiana y carencia de vacaciones.

Por todo ello decidió quedarse en la zona de los rancheaderos. Se dirigió hacia el sur evitando las ciudades, buscando los pueblos y, atravesando el Hennegau, llegó a las Ardenas. Por aquel entonces, la guerra había perdido mucho de su pundonorosa corrección y ya no se perseguía con tanta severidad como antes a los desertores (había tantos que era preferible ignorarlos). Pero, con todo, todavía no ha quedado claro cómo logró Huguenau salir de Bélgica sin tropiezos; quizá haya que atribuirlo a la seguridad de sonámbulo con la que fue alejándose de zona tan peligrosa: caminaba siempre hacia delante en el aire diáfano de la temprana primavera, marchaba como sumergido bajo un fanal de despreocupación, aislado del mundo y al mismo tiempo dentro de él, y sin plantearse problema alguno. Pasó de las Ardenas a territorio alemán, a las oscuras montañas de Eifel, donde todavía era pleno invierno y donde andar resultaba harto dificultoso. Los habitantes no le prestaron la menor atención; eran poco amables, retraídos y odiaban cualquier boca que pudiera arrebatarles el menor bocado. Huguenau tuvo que recurrir al tren y echar mano del dinero que hasta entonces había guardado. Las dificultades de la vida se le presentaban de un modo nuevo y diferente. Algo tenía que suceder para consolidar y prolongar aquel período de vacaciones.

III

La pequeña ciudad rodeada de viñedos se extendía por uno de los valles del Mosela. En lo alto se alzaban los bosques. Los viñedos ya habían sido podados, las guías colocadas en líneas rectas, interrumpidas aquí y allá por piedras rojizas. Huguenau observó con desaprobación que algún que otro propietario no había arrancado las malas hierbas de sus hazas y que esos trozos descuidados semejaban islas amarillentas y rectangulares entre las demás tierras de color rosa gris.

Pasados los últimos días de invierno, en las tierras altas de Eifel apareció de pronto la primavera. Como un signo de orden imperecedero y de apacible donaire, el sol sonreía al corazón llenándolo de alegre bienestar y alada seguridad; el miedo o la angustia que pudieran haberse infiltrado en lo más profundo del corazón, podían ahora ser barridos. Huguenau miró con satisfacción el hospital estatal del distrito situado a la entrada de la población; su larga fachada yacía bajo la tibia sombra de la mañana; le pareció muy apropiado que todas las ventanas estuvieran abiertas como en un sanatorio del sur, y se imaginó a sí mismo —lo cual le proporcionó una agradable sensación— ventilando al suave aire primaveral las salas de los enfermos. También encontró muy adecuado que el tejado del hospital luciera una enorme cruz roja; y al pasar por delante miró con benevolencia a los combatientes que, unos al sol, otros a la sombra, iban en

pos de su curación enfundados en batas grises.

Allá, al otro lado del río, se hallaba el cuartel. Era reconocible por lo vulgar de su construcción, propia del erario público. Había también otro edificio parecido a un convento: el presidio, según supo más adelante Huguenau. Pero la calle descendía cómoda y suavemente hacia la ciudad; y al cruzar la puerta medieval con su pequeño maletín de fibra en la mano —como antaño lo hiciera con la maleta-muestrario —, a Huguenau no le resultó desagradable que todo ello le recordara su llegada a las poblaciones de Würtenberg —¡la de tiempo que había pasado desde entonces!—, cuando iba a visitar a algún cliente.

Asimismo, a la vista de las calles medievales, no pudo dejar de acordarse de aquel día de vacación forzosa pasado en Nüremberg. Aquí, en el electorado de Tréveris, la guerra del Palatinado no había causado tantos estragos como al oeste del Rin; las casas de los siglos XV y XVI permanecían intactas, y también el ayuntamiento gótico en la plaza del Mercado, con sus añadidos renacentistas y su torre, y, delante de aquel, la picota donde en la Edad Media se ataba a los reos para exponerlos a la vergüenza pública. Y Huguenau, que, en sus viajes de negocios y sin darse cuenta de que existían, había visitado varias de estas hermosas y antiguas ciudades, experimentó una sensación desconocida, cuya procedencia no podía determinar ni deducir, pero que inundó su espíritu de una extraña sensación de hogar. Si le hubieran asegurado que se trataba del sentimiento estético que brota del seno mismo de la libertad, se habría reído con incredulidad; se habría reído como aquel que jamás ha vislumbrado, ni por asomo, la belleza del mundo, e incluso habría tenido razón, ya que nadie puede determinar si es en el seno de la libertad donde el alma se libra a la belleza o si es la propia belleza la que proporciona al alma un asomo de su libertad. A pesar de todo, no se habría equivocado, ya que, incluso para él, ha de existir un saber humano más profundo, un anhelo humano de libertad en el que resplandezca toda la luz del mundo y del que mane, cada domingo, la santificación de lo viviente. Además, puesto que así es y no puede ser de otro modo, es muy probable que, en el instante en que Huguenau se arrastraba fuera de la trinchera y se liberaba por vez primera de los compromisos humanos, sucediera que un reflejo del destello superior que es la libertad cayese sobre él, le fuera dado en parte también a él, y que en esos instantes ingresara por primera vez en el domingo.

Sin preocuparse por este tipo de meditaciones, Huguenau tomó una habitación en la hospedería de la plaza del Mercado. Como si pudiera disfrutar nuevamente de sus vacaciones, se dio la gran noche. A pesar de la guerra, el vino de Mosela le fue servido sin cupón de racionamiento, y seguía siendo un líquido maravilloso. Huguenau se permitió el lujo de beberse tres jarritas, lo que le llevó un tiempo considerable. Había burgueses sentados a algunas mesas, y, no siendo Huguenau uno de ellos, de cuando en cuando alguno le lanzaba una furtiva mirada inquisidora. Todos tenían sus ocupaciones, sus negocios, y él no tenía nada. Con todo, estaba contento y satisfecho. Se maravillaba de sí mismo: ¡sin negocios y no obstante satisfecho!, tan satisfecho que se entretenía pensando en las dificultades que surgirían si un hombre como él, indocumentado y sin clientela, pretendiera montar un negocio y conseguir crédito en una ciudad extraña. Resultaba divertido imaginarse las dificultades. Posiblemente el vino tenía la culpa de aquellos pensamientos. Sea como fuere, cuando Huguenau, con la cabeza algo turbia, fue en busca de su cama, no se sentía como un viajante de comercio abrumado por las preocupaciones, sino como un turista alegre y ligero.

IV

Cuando sacaron de la trinchera donde estaba medio enterrado al reservista Ludwig Gödicke, de profesión albañil, su boca, abierta para gritar, estaba llena de tierra. Su rostro era negro y azul, y su corazón parecía haber dejado de latir. Si los dos soldados de sanidad a cuyas manos fue a parar no hubieran apostado sobre si estaba vivo o muerto, hubiera sido enterrado de nuevo al instante. Que pudiera ver el sol y el mundo lleno de sol tenía que agradecérselo a los diez cigarrillos que habían constituido el valor de la apuesta.

Con la respiración artificial no lograron gran cosa, pese a sus muchos esfuerzos y sudores, pero se lo llevaron, lo vigilaron bien, lo riñeron también de vez en cuando porque se empeñaba en no revelar el acertijo de su vida, que en este caso era el acertijo de su muerte, y no cejaron en su empeño hasta que lograron ponerlo en manos de los médicos. Y así fue como el objeto de su apuesta quedó allí tendido, cuatro días, en el hospital de campaña; yacía inmóvil y con la piel de color negro. Si durante aquel tiempo había en él atisbos de una última y diminuta sensación de vida, si aquella vida tan pequeña era retenida entre dolores y sufrimientos por aquel cuerpo en ruinas, o si se trataba de un suave latido bienhechor al borde de un profundo abismo, es algo que no sabemos, y el reservista Gödicke no hubiera podido proporcionar información ninguna al respecto.

La vida volvió a su cuerpo a retazos, a medios cigarrillos por así decirlo, y tanto esa lentitud como la consiguiente precaución eran convenientes y lógicas, ya que aquel cuerpo magullado exigía la más

extrema inmovilidad. Durante largos días, Gödicke bien pudo creer que todavía era el niño de pañales que había sido cuarenta años atrás, víctima de una violencia incomprensible y no sintiendo sino esa violencia. De haberle sido posible, habría berreado pidiendo el pecho materno lleno de leche, y, efectivamente, llegó un momento en que comenzó a lloriquear. Comenzó durante el traslado, y se hubiera dicho que el suyo era el llanto doliente e incesante de un recién nacido; nadie quería dormir a su lado, y, una noche, un vecino de cama incluso le tiró algo. Por entonces se creyó que al fin tendría que morirse de hambre, pues a los médicos les resultaba imposible conseguir que tragara alimento de ninguna clase. Resultaba inexplicable que siguiera con vida, y la opinión del médico jefe de Estado Mayor Kuhlenbeck, según la cual su cuerpo vivía gracias a la sangre acumulada debajo de su magullada epidermis, apenas merecía el calificativo de opinión y, mucho menos, el de teoría. El bajo vientre era la parte más afectada. Se le aplicaban compresas frías, pero si le servían o no de alivio era algo imposible de constatar. Tal vez sus sufrimientos iban haciéndose menos intensos, pues el lloriqueo amainaba paulatinamente. Pero al cabo de unos días estalló de nuevo y con mayor intensidad que antes: ahora parecía como si Ludwig Gödicke —o al menos puede suponerse así— fuera recuperando su alma retazo a retazo, y como si cada uno de esos fragmentos le llegara arrastrado por una ola de sufrimientos. Y es muy posible pensar, lo que no pasa de ser una simple conjetura, que el dolor de un alma despedazada en átomos y convertida en polvo, alma a la que se obliga a recuperar su unidad, es mucho más intenso que cualquier otro tipo de dolor, mucho más insoportable que el dolor del cerebro traspasado, una y otra vez, por ondas convulsivas, mucho peor que todas las torturas corporales inherentes a dicho proceso.

Así pues, el reservista Gödicke yacía en su cama sobre cojines neumáticos hinchados y, mientras se procuraba introducir alimento en su extenuado organismo mediante sondas, pues resultaba imposible hacerlo de otro modo, su alma iba reconstruyéndose, hecho este incomprensible para el médico jefe de Estado Mayor, Kuhlenbeck, incomprensible para el médico jefe adjunto Flurschütz, e incomprensible para la enfermera Clara; su alma iba reagrupándose dolorosamente en torno a su yo.

V

Huguenau se despertó a buena hora. Es un hombre diligente. Una habitación correcta, no como la buhardilla de la casa parroquial; la cama, excelente. Huguenau se rascó los muslos. Luego intentó orientarse.

Hospedería, plaza del Mercado y, allí enfrente, el ayuntamiento.

A decir verdad, muchas eran las cosas que podían impulsarle a reanudar la trama de su vida en el punto y hora en que fue tan bárbaramente interrumpida; muchas eran las cosas que le inducían a cumplir con las obligaciones propias de un hombre de negocios y a hacer dinero actuando de intermediario en el comercio de mantequillas y textiles. Que, a pesar de ello, rechazara con disgusto cualquier idea sobre barriles de mantequilla, sacos de café o piezas de tejido le extrañó incluso a él, y era lógico que le extrañara a un hombre para quien, desde su infancia, solo existía un tema de conversación o de reflexión: el dinero y los negocios. Y, para sorpresa suya, volvió a acordarse de las vacaciones escolares. Huguenau prefiere pensar en la ciudad donde se halla.

Los viñedos se extienden detrás de la ciudad. En muchos de ellos abundan las malas hierbas. El marido o ha muerto en la guerra o está en la cárcel. La mujer no puede cultivarlos ella sola. O tal vez se ha ido por ahí con otro. Además, los precios del vino están bajo control del Estado. Para el que no sepa vender de contrabando no vale la pena cultivar los viñedos. ¡Y en cambio los hay de primerísima calidad! Desde luego, a uno le bullen las ideas en la cabeza.

En realidad, alguna de las viudas de guerra debería vender su viña, y a bajo precio.

Huguenau se preguntaba qué compradores podrían interesarse por los caldos del Mosela. Habría que encontrarlos. Podría ganarse una sustanciosa comisión. Los vinicultores eran los más indicados. Friedrichs, en Colonia; Matter & Co., en Frankfurt. En otro tiempo, él había comerciado con ellos.

Se arregló frente al espejo. Se peinó hacia atrás. El pelo le había crecido mucho desde que el barbero de la compañía le afeitara la cabeza. ¿Cuándo había sido? Parecía haber sucedido en otra vida, una vida anterior; en realidad, ahora debía de tenerlo todavía más largo. El pelo y las uñas siguen creciendo en los cadáveres. Cogió un mechón y tiró de él hacia abajo, por delante de la frente; le llegaba casi a la punta de la nariz. No, así no puede uno moverse entre la gente. En vísperas de fiesta, hay que cortarse el pelo. A decir verdad, no era fiesta, pero sí algo parecido.

La mañana era clara. Un poco fresca.

En la barbería había dos sillones amarillos con asientos de cuero negro. El maestro barbero, hombre ya viejo y de caminar vacilante, le puso a Huguenau un blusón no muy limpio; en la parte superior, junto al cuello, le introdujo un papel. Huguenau movió un poco la barbilla hacia ambos lados: el papel le picaba.

De un clavo colgaba un periódico y Huguenau se lo hizo traer. Era el periódico local: *El Mensajero del*

Electorado de Tréveris (con el suplemento *Agricultura y viticultura en la región del Mosela*). Precisamente lo que necesitaba.

Permaneció sentado, tranquilamente, examinando el periódico. Después se miró al espejo; podría tomársele por cualquiera de las personalidades del lugar. El pelo le quedaba ahora muy a su gusto: corto, recio, muy alemán. En la coronilla, un mechón más largo permitía marcar la raya. Llegó el momento del afeitado. El maestro barbero le llenó el rostro de una ligera y fría capa de espuma. El jabón era una porquería.

—Este jabón no vale nada —dijo Huguenau.

El maestro barbero no contestó; se limitó a asentar la navaja frotándola contra el afilón. Huguenau se sintió ofendido, pero al cabo de un rato dijo, como disculpándose:

—Mercancía de guerra.

El maestro barbero comenzó a afeitarlo. Con pasadas cortas, que raspaban mucho. Afeitaba tremendamente mal. No obstante, resultaba agradable dejarse afeitar. Afeitarse uno mismo forma parte de la guerra, pero es más barato. De todos modos es muy agradable que, de cuando en cuando y a modo de excepción, le sirvan a uno. Es festivo. En la pared se veía una muchacha muy escotada y, debajo, se leía LOCIÓN HOUBIGANT. Huguenau había apoyado la cabeza hacia atrás y sostenía el periódico con manos lacias. Aquel tipo le frotaba ahora la barbilla y el cuello, parecía que no iba a terminar nunca. De todos modos, Huguenau nada tenía que objetar: tenemos tiempo de sobra. Y, a fin de prolongar todavía más la operación, pidió loción Houbigant. Le pusieron agua de colonia.

Recién afeitado, hombre afeitado, refrescado y con la pituitaria impregnada de olor a agua de colonia, se encaminó de vuelta a la hospedería. Cuando se quitó el sombrero, lo olió por dentro. Olía a pomada, lo cual también resultaba reconfortante.

El comedor estaba vacío. Huguenau tomó café y la camarera le trajo también una tarjeta de racionamiento de pan. No había mantequilla, solo una mermelada negruzca que parecía jarabe. Tampoco el café era auténtico, y Huguenau, mientras concluía a sorbos aquel brebaje tibio, calculó cuánto ganaban los fabricantes con semejante sucedáneo del café; realizó los cálculos sin sentir envidia alguna y sus conclusiones le parecieron justas. Desde luego, adquirir viñedos a buen precio en la región del Mosela no era mal negocio, al contrario, era una magnífica inversión de capital. Y, así que hubo desayunado, se puso a redactar un anuncio de compra de viñedos a precio razonable. Después se encaminó con el anuncio a *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*.

VI

El hospital del distrito estaba totalmente militarizado. El médico jefe adjunto, doctor Friedrichs Flurschütz, recorría las habitaciones de los enfermos. Llevaba la gorra de uniforme, pero también la blanca bata de médico. El teniente Jaretzki afirmaba que esto le confería un aspecto ridículo.

Jaretzki había sido instalado en el cuarto 111 de los oficiales. Fue pura casualidad, ya que las habitaciones dobles estaban destinadas a los oficiales de Estado Mayor, pero allí se quedó. Cuando entró Flurschütz, él se hallaba sentado en el borde de la cama, con un cigarrillo en los labios, y teniendo el brazo, con el vendaje deshecho, apoyado sobre la mesilla de noche.

—Bueno, ¿cómo va eso, Jaretzki?

Jaretzki le enseñó el brazo.

—El médico jefe acaba de salir…

Flurschütz examinó el brazo, palpándolo con cuidado por varios sitios:

—Mal asunto… ¿Sigue progresando?

—Sí, un par de centímetros más… El viejo quiere amputar.

El brazo, lacio y enrojecido, con la palma de la mano reblandecida e hinchada y los dedos como salchichas violáceas, presentaba en torno a la muñeca una corona de pústulas amarillentas.

Jaretzki contempló su brazo, y dijo:

—¡Cómo está el pobre!

—No lo tome por la tremenda: es el izquierdo.

—Sí, claro, y como ustedes solo saben cortar…

Flurschütz se encogió de hombros:

—¿Qué quiere que le diga? Este ha sido el siglo de la cirugía, coronado por una guerra mundial con cañones… Ahora nos dedicamos a las glándulas y, en la próxima guerra, podremos tratar a la perfección los malditos gases vesicantes, pero, por el momento, no podemos hacer otra cosa que cortar.

Jaretzki dijo:

—¿La próxima guerra? No creerá usted que esta acabará algún día…

—No hay que verlo todo tan negro, Jaretzki: los rusos ya han abandonado.

Jaretzki rió con amargura:

—Que Dios le conserve esa fe pueril y nos dé buenos cigarrillos…

Con la mano derecha —la sana— cogió un paquete de cigarrillos del compartimiento abierto situado bajo el cajón de la mesilla de noche, y se lo tendió a Flurschütz.

Flurschütz señaló el cenicero, lleno de colillas:

—No debería usted fumar tanto…

La enfermera Mathilde entró:

—Bueno, ¿qué? ¿Lo volvemos a vendar…? ¿Qué opina usted, doctor?

La enfermera Mathilde parecía siempre recién lavada. Tenía pecas junto a la raíz del pelo. Flurschütz dijo:

—¡Mierda de gases!

Permaneció un momento aún, viendo cómo la enfermera vendaba el brazo, y luego prosiguió su recorrido. En ambos extremos de los anchos corredores las ventanas estaban abiertas de par en par; no obstante, resultaba insuficiente para barrer el olor a hospital.

VII

La casa estaba en la calle Fischer, una de las callejas sinuosas que descienden hacia el río; era una construcción con entramado de madera visto en la que, evidentemente, se habían ensayado artesanías de todas clases. Junto a la puerta, un gran letrero de metal con letras de un dorado pálido anunciaba: *EL MENSAJERO DEL ELECTORADO DE TRÉVERIS*. REDACCIÓN E IMPRESIÓN (EN EL PATIO).

A través de un estrecho zaguán semejante a un pasillo —debido a cuya oscuridad tropezó en la trampa de la escalera que bajaba a la bodega— y pasando ante el arranque de la escalera que conducía a las viviendas, llegó a un patio en forma de herradura, que sorprendía por su amplitud. Junto al patio se hallaba el jardín; allí florecían algunos cerezos y, más allá, la vista se perdía hasta alcanzar las bellas laderas de las montañas.

El conjunto reflejaba el carácter rural de su antiguo dueño. Con seguridad, las dos alas del edificio habían contenido graneros y corrales; el ala izquierda constaba de un solo piso, con una estrecha escalera exterior, semejante a la de un gallinero, adosada contra el muro; probablemente, allí estuvieron antaño los cuartos de los criados. El edificio de los establos, situado a la derecha, en lugar de tener un piso, se veía cubierto por una empinada techumbre destinada a proteger el heno, y una de las puertas del establo había sido transformada en humilde ventana de hierro, tras la cual podía verse trabajar una máquina impresora.

El hombre que estaba junto a la impresora informó a Huguenau de que el señor Esch se hallaba enfrente, en el primer piso.

Así pues, Huguenau trepó por la escalera de gallinero y se topó de manos a boca con una puerta que ostentaba el rótulo REDACCIÓN, puerta que daba al despacho donde el señor Esch, propietario y editor de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, ejercía sus funciones. Era un hombre delgado y de rostro barbilampiño, en el que una boca de actor, enmarcada por dos largas y profundas arrugas que surcaban las mejillas, dibujaba una leve y sarcástica sonrisa, que dejaba entrever unos dientes grandes y amarillos. Su rostro tenía algo de actor, pero también de cura y de caballo.

Examinó el anuncio con expresión de juez inquisidor y como si se tratara de un manuscrito. Huguenau se llevó la mano a la cartera, de la que sacó un billete de cinco marcos, dando a entender en cierto modo y de esta manera que esa era la cantidad que estaba dispuesto a pagar por el anuncio. Pero el otro, sin prestar la menor atención a su maniobra, le preguntó sin más preámbulo:

—¿De modo que usted pretende explotar a la gente de aquí? ¿Acaso ya se habla por ahí de la miseria de nuestros viñadores, eh?

Era una agresión tan inesperada que Huguenau tuvo la impresión de que estaba destinada a subir el precio del anuncio. Y sacó otro marco, pero obtuvo un resultado del todo contrario al que esperaba:

—No, gracias… El anuncio no se insertará en el periódico. Por lo visto, usted ignora qué es la prensa comprada. Mire, yo no me vendo ni por seis marcos, ni por diez, ¡ni por cien!

Huguenau estaba cada vez más convencido de hallarse frente a un astuto negociante. Y, precisamente por ello, no había que ceder; tal vez aquel tipo solo buscaba una participación en el asunto, lo cual no tenía aspecto de resultar desventajoso.

—Mmm… he oído decir que esto de los anuncios también se consigue a cambio de un tanto por ciento de participación… ¿Qué tal un cincuenta por ciento de comisión? Claro está que, en ese caso, usted deberá publicar el anuncio por lo menos tres veces, desde luego… Naturalmente es usted libre de publicarlo las veces que quiera, la caridad no tiene límites —y, al tiempo que se arriesgaba a sonreír con aire de complicidad, Huguenau se sentó de golpe junto a la tosca mesa de cocina que servía de escritorio al señor Esch.

Esch no le escuchaba, sino que recorría la habitación de un lado a otro con cara de pocos amigos y con zancadas nada airosas, que cuadraban con su delgadez. El suelo, recién fregado, gemía bajo el peso de sus pasos, y Huguenau observó que estaba agujereado y que había ceniza entre las tablas del entarimado; también observó que los pesados zapatones negros del señor Esch no se ataban con cordones normales sino con hebillas parecidas a las de las sillas de montar; además, por sus bordes asomaban unos calcetines grises de punto de media. Esch monologaba:

—Ahora los buitres pretenden caer sobre estas pobres gentes… Pero si alguien intenta llamar la atención de la opinión pública sobre tanta miseria, se topa con la censura.

Huguenau cruzó las piernas y se dedicó a mirar los objetos que había sobre la mesa: una taza de café vacía con restos ya secos de haber bebido en ella; una reproducción en bronce de la neoyorquina estatua de la Libertad (¡ajajá, un pisapapeles!); una lámpara de petróleo cuya blanca mecha recordaba, confusa y vagamente, en su recipiente de cristal, un feto o una tenia conservados en alcohol… La voz de Esch sonó ahora desde un rincón:

—El censor debería ver con sus propios ojos el sufrimiento y la miseria… Esta gente acude a mí… Esto sería una traición…

Sobre una vacilante estantería había muchos papeles y montones de periódicos atados. Esch había vuelto a sus zancadas. En mitad de la pared —pintada de amarillo— y colgando de un clavo situado al azar, se veía un pequeño cuadro amarillento y enmarcado en negro, *Badenweiler y la colina del castillo*; tal vez era una vieja postal. Huguenau reflexionó: cuadros y figuritas de bronce como aquellos quedarían muy bien en su oficina. Pero al querer recordar cómo era la oficina y qué hacía en ella, no lo consiguió; le resultaba tan lejano y poco familiar que desistió de su empeño en recordar y centró de nuevo su mirada en el excitado señor Esch, cuya chaqueta de pana y cuyos pantalones de paño, de color claro, tan mal encajaban con los toscos zapatos; tan mal como la estatuilla de bronce con la mesa de cocina. Probablemente Esch se dio cuenta del significado de su mirada, porque gritó:

—Pero ¡por todos los diablos!, ¿qué hace usted ahí sentado todavía?

Naturalmente, Huguenau hubiera podido irse, pero ¿adónde? No era fácil trazar un nuevo plan. Huguenau se sentía colocado por una fuerza extraña sobre unos raíles de los que no podía salirse sin más ni más, ni mucho menos sin recibir un castigo. Así pues, permaneció sentado y, a fin de conservar su aplomo, se limitó a limpiar tranquilamente sus gafas, como solía hacer siempre que se enfrentaba con difíciles operaciones comerciales. Tampoco esta vez le falló el truco, ya que Esch, muy irritado, se plantó ante él y estalló una vez más:

—¿De dónde viene usted, en realidad? ¿Quién le ha enviado aquí…? Desde luego, usted no es de aquí y no pretenderá hacerme creer que tiene la intención de convertirse en viticultor precisamente aquí… ¡Lo que usted quiere es espiar! ¡Debería estar en la cárcel!

Esch se había quedado de pie frente a él. Se oyó rechinar el cinturón de cuero que asomaba por entre la chaqueta de pana. Una de las perneras del pantalón era más clara que la otra. No sirve de nada limpiarlos con cualquier producto químico, pensó Huguenau; tendría que teñirse los pantalones de negro; debería decírselo; en realidad ¿qué quiere de mí?, si de verdad desea echarme, no tiene por qué provocar primero una discusión… o sea, que quiere que me quede. En todo aquello había algo que no marchaba como era debido. Algo percibía Huguenau en su interior que le impulsaba a establecer con aquel hombre una posible camaradería y, al propio tiempo, olfateaba ventajas. Con aire conciliador, intentó ganar terreno:

—Señor Esch, le he propuesto un negocio legal, si usted quiere rechazarlo es asunto suyo. Pero si lo que pretende es simplemente increparme, seguir esta conversación no tiene ningún sentido.

Dobló las gafas y se alzó ligeramente de su asiento, insinuando así de modo simbólico que podía muy bien marcharse; solo faltaba decirlo.

Esch no parecía, en efecto, tener ganas de interrumpir la conversación: alzó una mano con aire benévolo y Huguenau cambió su simbólica postura de marcha por la de sentado.

—Efectivamente, que yo me dedique a cultivar viñedos aquí es problemático; en eso podría usted llevar razón, aunque tampoco hay que excluirlo del todo: uno desea tranquilidad. Pero nadie quiere explotar a los demás —se acaloró—. Un tratante es tan digno de respeto como cualquier otro ser humano; solo pretende hacer un negocio que satisfaga por igual a las dos partes; disfruta así. Además, quiero rogarle que tenga cuidado con expresiones como «espía»; en tiempos de guerra puede resultar peligroso.

Esch se sintió avergonzado:

—Yo… yo no quería ofenderle… A veces, el asco le sube a uno hasta la garganta y a la fuerza ha de salir por alguna parte… Un constructor vienés, un estafador a todas luces, compró unos solares a precios irrisorios… Echó a las gentes de sus casas y haciendas… Y el boticario le ha imitado… ¿Para qué necesita el señor Paulsen, el boticario, esos viñedos? ¿Me lo puede usted decir?

Huguenau repitió ofendido:

—Espiar…

Esch comenzó a ir otra vez de un lado a otro:

—Emigrar, eso es lo que habría que hacer. A América. Si yo fuera más joven, lo echaría todo por la ventana y empezaría de nuevo… —Se detuvo frente a Huguenau—: ¿Por qué no está usted en el frente…? Usted es joven… ¿Cómo se las ha arreglado para poder deambular por aquí?

De pronto había recobrado su tono agresivo. Pero Huguenau no deseaba tocar aquel tema; desvió la conversación: era incomprensible que un hombre de buena posición, que ocupaba el cargo más alto de un periódico, que vivía rodeado de un hermoso paisaje, que era respetado por sus conciudadanos y que, sobre todo, ya tenía cierta edad, elucubrara proyectos de emigración.

Esch hizo una mueca de sarcasmo:

—Respetado por mis conciudadanos, respetado por mis conciudadanos… Me persiguen como perros…

Huguenau contempló la colina del castillo de Badenweiler; luego, dijo:

—Increíble…

—No me extrañaría que usted se pusiera de su parte…

Huguenau trató de navegar hacia aguas más propicias:

—¿Otra vez con vagos reproches, señor Esch? Si tiene algo contra mí, ¿quiere expresarse al menos con mayor precisión?

Pero los impulsivos y agresivos pensamientos del señor Esch no se doblegaban con tanta facilidad.

—Expresarse con mayor precisión, expresarse al menos con mayor precisión… Otra vez la absurda charlatanería… Como si fuera posible darle a cada cosa su nombre… —Se acercó a Huguenau y le gritó en pleno rostro—: Jovencito, hasta que no sepa usted que todos los nombres son falsos, no sabrá nada de nada… Ni siquiera las ropas que cubren su cuerpo son verdaderas.

Huguenau se sintió muy incómodo, y dijo que no comprendía.

—Naturalmente que no comprende… Pero que un boticario arramble con unos cuantos terrenos por un precio irrisorio, eso sí lo comprende… Y probablemente también comprende que se persiga a un hombre que llama a las cosas por su nombre, y que se le cuelgue el sambenito de comunista… y que le echen encima un censor, ¿no…? Seguro que a usted todo eso le parece muy bien. Y es muy posible que considere que vivimos en un estado justo, ¿no es cierto?

Huguenau dijo que, en todo caso, se trataba de situaciones enojosas.

—¡Enojosas! Emigrar, eso tendría que hacer… Estoy hasta la coronilla de ir dando palos de ciego contra todo…

Huguenau preguntó qué pensaba hacer el señor Esch con el periódico.

Esch trazó con la mano un gesto ambiguo; ya se lo había dicho a su mujer en más de una ocasión: lo mejor sería venderlo todo —la casa no, la casa la conservaría—, y montar una librería, ya lo había pensado.

—¿O sea que el periódico ha sido atacado, señor Esch? Me refiero a si ya no tiene tanta difusión como antes…

No, no era eso, *El Mensajero* tenía una clientela fija entre los taberneros, los peluqueros, sobre todo en los pueblos de los alrededores; los ataques procedían de círculos muy concretos de la población. Pero estaba harto de luchar contra ellos.

—¿Tenía ya alguna idea respecto al precio el señor Esch?

—Sí, claro… Veinte mil marcos, incluida la imprenta, sería un precio de amigo. Por otra parte, él quería ofrecer a la empresa del periódico unos locales libres de gastos, durante algún tiempo, digamos cinco años, lo cual sería muy ventajoso para el comprador. Es lo que había pensado, y le parecía justo, no quería explotar a nadie, sencillamente estaba harto. También se lo había dicho a su mujer.

—Bueno —dijo Huguenau—, no pregunto por simple curiosidad, ya le he dicho que soy viajante y tal vez podría hacer algo por usted… Mire, querido señor Esch —y al decir esto dio unos golpecitos paternalistas sobre la huesuda espalda del propietario del periódico—, verá usted cómo juntos hacemos un buen negocio; nunca hay que echar con cajas destempladas a nadie sin haberle oído antes. Pero, eso sí, quítese de la cabeza lo de los veinte mil. En los tiempos que corren, nadie paga fantasías.

Muy seguro de sí y con aire jovial descendió Huguenau la escalera de gallinero.

Frente a la puerta de la imprenta había una niña sentada.

Huguenau se quedó mirándola; también miró la puerta de acceso a la imprenta. Había en ella un letrero que decía PROHIBIDA LA ENTRADA A TODA PERSONA AJENA A LA EMPRESA.

Veinte mil marcos, pensó, y la pequeña de regalo.

Él era ajeno a la empresa, pero no podían prohibirle la entrada; si uno ha de tramitar una venta, antes ha de conocer la mercancía. En realidad, Esch habría tenido que mostrarle la imprenta. Huguenau pensó si debía o no llamarle para que bajara, pero luego lo dejó correr: de todos modos volvería al cabo de uno o dos días, incluso tal vez con una proposición de venta concreta (Huguenau estaba absolutamente seguro de ello); además, era la hora de comer. Así que se encaminó a la hospedería.

VIII

Hanna Wendling estaba despierta. No abrió los ojos porque aún cabía la posibilidad de recuperar el sueño que se alejaba. Pero el sueño seguía alejándose más cada vez, hasta que, finalmente, solo quedó la sensación en la que el sueño había estado inmerso. Cuando aquella sensación comenzó a desaparecer —instantes antes de que se desvaneciera del todo—, Hanna se rindió ante la evidencia y parpadeó ligeramente mirando hacia la ventana. A través de sus rendijas se filtraba una claridad lechosa; o tenía que ser muy pronto o el día estaba lluvioso. La claridad, que entraba a ráfagas difuminadas, era como una prolongación del sueño, tal vez porque no venía acompañada del más mínimo ruido, y Hanna dedujo que por fuerza tenía que ser muy pronto. Las persianas se movían ligeramente, oscilando entre las abiertas alas de las ventanas, probablemente debido a la brisa matinal y, aspirando de modo profundo su frescor, agudizó el oído, como si así pudiera adivinar la hora. Después, todavía con los ojos cerrados, extendió el brazo hacia la izquierda y palpó la cama contigua: no estaba deshecha: el colchón, el edredón y la colcha se hallaban en perfecto orden, todo convenientemente dispuesto bajo el cubrecama de terciopelo. Antes de retirar su mano para proteger de nuevo el desnudo hombro bajo la tibieza del cobertor, volvió a pasarla por encima del blando y algo frío cubrecama, como para cerciorarse del todo de que se hallaba sola. El fino camisón se le había subido hasta las caderas, donde formaba un burujo incómodo. Esto demostraba que había vuelto a tener un sueño agitado. Entretanto, y en cierto modo como una compensación, la mano derecha descansaba sobre su suave y cálido cuerpo y, con las yemas de los dedos, acariciaba de manera casi imperceptible la piel y la pelusa de los senos. No pudo evitar acordarse de alguno de los cuadros típicos del rococó; después le vino a la mente *La maja desnuda* de Goya. Permaneció echada así un poco más. Después se bajó el camisón —era curioso que un camisón fino como un suspiro pudiera dar de inmediato sensación de calor—, pensó si volverse hacia la izquierda o hacia la derecha, y se decidió por la derecha, como si la cama contigua con su montón de ropa pudiera robarle el aire; atendió todavía un poco al silencio de la calle y se refugió en un nuevo sueño, huyó hacia un sueño nuevo antes de llegar a percibir nada que procediera del exterior.

Cuando, una hora más tarde, volvió a despertarse, se sintió incapaz de engañarse otra vez y fingir que la mañana no se hallaba muy avanzada. Para el que solo está atado con hilos livianos y casi inexistentes a eso que se llama, o que él mismo llama, vida, levantarse por las mañanas constituye siempre una tarea muy difícil. Incluso una pequeña violencia. Y a Hanna Wendling, que sentía aproximarse las inevitables dificultades del día, le entró dolor de cabeza. Le empezó por la parte posterior del cráneo. Entrelazó las manos bajo la nuca y, al meter los dedos por entre sus cabellos y acariciárselos con suavidad, olvidó por un momento el dolor de cabeza. Después presionó la parte que más le dolía: era como una punzada que, partiendo de detrás de las orejas, se extendía hasta la base del cráneo. Ya conocía aquel dolor. Cuando se hallaba entre la gente, el dolor resultaba a veces tan agudo que todo le daba vueltas. Tomando una decisión repentina, apartó el cobertor hacia un lado, deslizó los pies en las zapatillas, levantó las persianas aunque no del todo y, con ayuda del espejo de mano, intentó localizar a través del gran espejo del tocador el centro doloroso de la nuca. ¿Qué era lo que le dolía? No se veía nada especial. Movió la cabeza a uno y otro lado; las vértebras se desplazaban bajo la piel (en realidad era una hermosa nuca). También los hombros eran bonitos. Le hubiera gustado desayunar en la cama, pero estaban en guerra, y ya resultaba bastante bochornoso haberse quedado tanto tiempo en la cama. En realidad, hubiera tenido que acompañar al chico al colegio. Se lo pedía todos los días. Y lo había hecho un par de veces, pero después había vuelto a dejar esa tarea a la criada. Naturalmente, hacía ya tiempo que el muchacho debería tener una señorita francesa o inglesa. Las inglesas son mejores pedagogas. En cuanto termine la guerra, habrá que enviar al chico a Inglaterra. Cuando ella tenía la edad que él tiene ahora —sí, eso es: siete años—, hablaba mejor el inglés que el alemán. Buscó un frasquito de vinagrillo y se frotó la nuca y las sienes; se miró con detenimiento los ojos en el espejo; eran pardos con reflejos dorados, y en el izquierdo destacaba una venita roja. Era culpa de su intranquilo sueño. Se echó el quimono por encima de los hombros y tocó el timbre para que acudiera la criada.

Hanna Wendling era la esposa del abogado Heinrich Wendling. Ella era de Frankfurt. Heinrich Wendling llevaba dos años en Rumanía o en Besarabia o en cualquier otro lugar de por allá.

IX

Huguenau tomó asiento en el comedor. En una de las mesas contiguas había un oficial del ejército con el pelo blanco. La camarera le estaba sirviendo precisamente un plato de sopa, y el anciano se comportó de una manera curiosa de verdad: juntando las manos y con rostro impasible, rostro de vivos colores, se inclinó sobre la mesa con expresión piadosa y no partió el pan hasta haber concluido lo que, a todas luces, era una plegaria.

Los ojos de Huguenau, nada acostumbrados a ver semejante modo de actuar, permanecieron inmóviles; llamó con una seña a la sirvienta y, con toda desenvoltura, le preguntó quién era tan curioso oficial.

La sirvienta, inclinándose, le dijo al oído que era el comandante de la plaza, noble propietario de una hacienda situada en la parte occidental de Prusia, que había sido reincorporado al servicio activo mientras durase la guerra. Su mujer y sus hijos se habían quedado en la hacienda y él se comunicaba con ellos a diario por carta. La comandancia estaba en el ayuntamiento, pero el comandante vivía allí, en el hotel, desde que empezó la guerra.

Huguenau quedó satisfecho, pero de pronto sintió un frío que le paralizaba el estómago y, al mismo tiempo, comprendió de repente que allí sentado estaba un hombre cuya persona encarnaba el poder militar, que a ese hombre le bastaría con levantar el brazo enarbolando la cuchara para destruirle a él, y que por tanto él, Huguenau, vivía pared por medio con su verdugo. Su apetito voló. ¿No sería mejor anular la comida encargada y huir?

Entretanto, la sirvienta le había traído ya la sopa y, al tiempo que tomaba mecánicamente las primeras cucharadas, desapareció el frío que lo paralizaba, dando paso a una sensación de debilidad y de abandono casi rejuvenecedores y felices. Además, no podía huir, tenía que poner en claro el asunto de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*.

En efecto, casi estaba de buen humor. Porque, ¿no es cierto que el hombre cree que sus decisiones y determinaciones tienen lugar en un amplio campo, cuando la realidad es que no son sino un movimiento pendular entre la huida y la añoranza, y que toda añoranza y toda huida desembocan en la muerte? Y así, prendido en esa oscilación del alma y del espíritu entre un polo y su contrario, Huguenau, el Wilhelm Huguenau que hacía un momento se disponía a huir, se sentía ahora extrañamente atraído por el hombre viejo de un poco más allá.

Comió maquinalmente —ni siquiera se dio cuenta de que aquel día tocaba pescado—, bebió mecánicamente y, en aquella realidad extrema, lúcida por así decirlo, de la que participaba desde hacía unas semanas, las cosas se disgregaron y retrocedieron, retrocedieron hasta los confines del mundo, hasta allí donde todo lo que se ha disgregado vuelve a unirse y donde la lejanía es de nuevo abolida: la huida se convierte en añoranza y la añoranza en huida, y *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* pasa a formar con aquel comandante de pelo blanco una extraña e indisoluble unidad. No cabe expresarlo con mayor precisión o de modo más racional, pues también los actos de Huguenau se producen bajo la supresión de toda distancia, en cierto modo irracionalmente, como por efecto de un cortocircuito y sin tiempo para reflexionar; por ello, lo que Huguenau hace esperando a que el mayor concluya de comer no es esperar en realidad; lo que le lleva a levantarse en el momento en que el mayor, tras otra silenciosa plegaria, empuja la silla hacia atrás y enciende un cigarrillo es una especie de simultaneidad entre causa y efecto. Sin sentirse cohibido en absoluto, se acerca al mayor en dos zancadas, y lo aborda sin miramientos, pese a que, al hacerlo, todavía no ha encontrado ningún pretexto que justifique semejante agresión.

Pero, apenas se hubo presentado como es debido y tomó asiento sin haber sido invitado a hacerlo, cuando las palabras comenzaron a fluir con toda facilidad de su boca: se permitía comunicarle, con todo respeto, que formaba parte del servicio de Prensa y que por ello se hallaba comisionado allí; que en el lugar existía un periódico, llamado *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, que, debido a su postura, daba mucho que pensar, y que él, provisto de los correspondientes plenos poderes, estaba allí para estudiar la situación sobre el terreno. En efecto, y… —¿qué diré ahora?, pensaba Huguenau, pero las palabras siguieron brotando a chorro como si solo tomaran forma al llegar a sus labios—, en efecto, y… dado que las cuestiones de censura eran, en cierto modo y hasta cierto punto, competencia de la comandancia de la ciudad, consideraba deber suyo tomarse la libertad de comunicarle todo aquello al señor mayor y, al mismo tiempo, presentarle sus respetos.

Mientras duró el discurso, el mayor se echó un poco hacia atrás y adoptó una postura muy conforme con las ordenanzas militares; luego intentó objetar que para semejante asunto le parecía que lo más conveniente era seguir los trámites oficiales acostumbrados. Huguenau, que no podía permitirse que rompiera el hilo de su alocución, apenas prestó atención a las palabras del mayor y atajó su objeción alegando que, con todos los respetos, no se había dirigido al señor mayor con carácter oficial sino oficioso ya que los mencionados plenos poderes no eran estatales sino que le habían sido otorgados por las grandes industrias patrióticas. No era necesario dar nombres, ya que era de sobra sabido quiénes le habían comisionado para comprar, a buen precio si se terciaba, periódicos sospechosos, siendo como era necesario evitar a toda costa que determinadas y equívocas ideas se divulgaran entre el pueblo. Y Huguenau repitió «equívocas ideas» como si esa repetición le tornara al punto de partida y le proporcionara seguridad, como si esas palabras fueran un mullido lecho sobre el que pudiera descansar a la perfección.

Lo más probable es que el mayor no comprendiera adónde quería ir a parar, pero asintió con la cabeza, y Huguenau reemprendió el círculo de sus ideas: sí, se trataba de periódicos comprometidos y, a su juicio y al de cualquiera, *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* era un periódico comprometido, cuya compra él no recomendaría en absoluto.

Miró al mayor con aire de triunfo y tamborileando al mismo tiempo con los dedos en la mesa, como si esperara que el comandante de la plaza le alabara y le admirara por su bien desarrollada exposición.

—Altamente patriótico, es evidente —admitió por fin el mayor—, le agradezco que me lo haya comunicado.

Huguenau debería haberse conformado con aquello y marcharse, pero tenía que lograr mejores resultados, así que dio las gracias al mayor, sobre todo por la benevolencia demostrada, y, acogiéndose precisamente a esa benevolencia, le rogó que le concediera un último favor:

—Mis representados consideran muy importante, cosa fácil de comprender, que en la compra de un periódico de este tipo, que puede considerarse en mayor o menor grado una publicación local, se tenga en cuenta la posibilidad de que haya personas del lugar interesadas en el asunto; desde luego es algo muy comprensible, por los controles, etc., etc. ¿Comprende el señor mayor?

El mayor no comprendía nada, pero dijo que sí lo entendía.

Muy bien, entonces, continuó Huguenau, su ruego se refería a que el señor mayor, persona que en aquella ocasión podía ser considerada como la más competente, tuviera la bondad de citar a algunos caballeros de confianza residentes en el lugar y con posesiones en el mismo que pudieran —con las máximas garantías de discreción, naturalmente— estar interesados en el proyecto.

El mayor opinó que, hablando en propiedad, aquel asunto incumbía a la administración civil y no a la comandancia militar; no obstante, aconsejaba al señor Huguenau que acudiera allí mismo el viernes por la noche, pues en ese día solían reunirse allí algunos consejeros municipales y otros ciudadanos respetables.

—¡Magnífico!, pero el señor mayor también ha de estar presente —dijo Huguenau, quien no cedía con facilidad—; es importante que el señor mayor patrocine la gestión; solo así puedo garantizar su éxito, en especial teniendo en cuenta que se trata de capitales relativamente pequeños y… para muchos caballeros resultará altamente interesante ponerse así en contacto y, en cierto modo, asociarse con las grandes industrias… Magnífico, magnífico en verdad… Si el señor mayor me permite fumar…

Y, acercando un poco más su silla, cogió un cigarro del estuche, limpió los cristales de sus gafas y comenzó a fumar.

El mayor dijo que, desde luego, todo aquello presagiaba buenos auspicios, pero que lamentaba no entender nada en asuntos de negocios.

¡Oh, eso no importa en absoluto!, afirmó Huguenau, no tenía nada que ver. Y como, tal vez por virtuosismo, tal vez por afianzar la al fin lograda seguridad, tal vez por simple euforia, deseaba continuar su perorata, se acercó aún más al mayor y solicitó su permiso para comunicarle algo más, algo que, desde luego, solo afectaba al mayor en persona; a saber: de sus conversaciones sostenidas hasta el presente con el editor del periódico, un tal señor Esch, de quien con toda seguridad el señor mayor habría oído hablar, había sacado la impresión de que tras el periódico se ocultaba, con toda certeza, un movimiento soterrado de elementos peligrosamente subversivos, como así lo afirmaban los rumores en circulación, pero, si el proyecto relativo al periódico llegaba a realizarse, él, el mayor, estaría entonces en situación de clarificar tan oscuros movimientos en beneficio de todo el pueblo, tal como debe ser. Y antes de que el anciano pudiera replicar, Huguenau se levantó y terminó su discurso diciendo:

—Por favor, ¡oh, por favor!, no hago sino cumplir con mi deber de patriota… No vale la pena hablar de ello… Así pues, me permito aceptar su deferente invitación para el viernes por la noche.

Se cuadró ante él entrechocando los tacones y regresó a su mesa casi a paso de baile.

X

El hecho de que el señor August Esch efectuara su trabajo en la redacción de modo tan malhumorado e intransigente y de que se sintiera tan incómodo en su puesto pudiera deberse a que, durante toda su vida, y antes de que, por culpa de una herencia inesperada —lo cual sucedió ya muy avanzada la guerra—, entrara en posesión de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* y de los bienes anejos al mismo, había ejercido la profesión de contable e incluso, durante muchos años, había sido jefe de contabilidad en una gran empresa industrial de Luxemburgo, su país natal.

Un contable —y más aún un jefe de contabilidad —es un hombre que vive según normas muy precisas, tanto interna como exteriormente, y dichas normas son tan exactas que le impiden dedicarse a cualquier otro tipo de actividad. Está acostumbrado a apoyarse en —y atrincherarse tras— esas normas, a vivir en un mundo autoritario y sumiso a la vez, mundo en el que cada cosa ocupa su lugar, mundo en el que se encuentra siempre a sí mismo y donde nada puede turbar o alterar sus puntos de vista. Pasa las páginas del libro mayor y las coteja con las del diario y con las del libro de balances; una serie de puentes ininterrumpidos conducen de unas a otras y viceversa, asegurando la vida y la obra cotidiana. Por las mañanas, el chico de los recados o una jovencita de correos traen los justificantes, y el jefe de contabilidad los firma para que los jóvenes empleados puedan incluirlos enseguida en los diferentes apartados. Hecho

esto, el jefe de contabilidad puede reflexionar tranquilamente en los casos difíciles, hacer indicaciones y ordenar verificaciones. Cuando mentalmente ha organizado y aclarado un delicado caso, nuevos y sólidos puentes se tienden y se superponen a sus ojos de continente en continente, y esa maraña de relaciones entre unas cuentas y otras, esa red inextricable —y, sin embargo, tan clara para él— red en la que no falta el menor detalle, queda finalmente reducida a un único número simbólico que él ve de antemano, aunque no aparezca en los balances hasta pasados varios meses. ¡Oh, dulce excitación de los balances!, no importa que reflejen ganancias o pérdidas, pues para el contable todo negocio quiere decir ganancias y satisfacción. Si los balances mensuales provisionales significan el triunfo de la fuerza y de la habilidad, no son nada comparados con el gran balance final, que se cierra cada seis meses: en esos días él es el capitán de la nave y su mano jamás abandona el timón; los jóvenes del departamento son como los galeotes amarrados a sus puestos, y, hasta que todas las cuentas han sido cerradas, ni se tienen en consideración las pausas del mediodía ni el sueño nocturno. Pero es él en persona quien determina el saldo de ganancias y pérdidas, y también el de los balances y, concluido el saldo, él es quien traza la línea horizontal que cierra todas las cuentas, él quien sella el trabajo con su rúbrica. Pero ¡ay si el balance no cuadra aunque sea por un solo pfennig! Placer nuevo este, aunque amargo. Con la ayuda del primer auxiliar de contable resigue las cuentas sospechosas con ojos de detective y, si ello no sirve de nada, se vuelve a repasar toda la contabilidad efectuada en medio año. Y ¡pobre de aquel en cuyo trabajo se descubra un error!: sobre él se abaten la furia y el helado desprecio e, incluso tal vez, el despido. Pero si se descubre que el error no procede de los libros de contabilidad sino de los inventarios de los almacenes, el jefe de contabilidad se encoge simplemente de hombros, con una sonrisa o sarcástica o piadosa, porque los inventarios no son de su incumbencia y porque sabe además que en los almacenes, como en la vida, jamás puede alcanzarse el orden que mantiene en sus libros. Esboza con la mano un gesto despectivo y regresa a su despacho. Cuando, pasados semejantes días, renace la calma, no es raro ver al jefe de contabilidad abrir uno de los infolios al azar, reseguir con el pulgar una página y sumar las columnas de números para comprobarlas, alegrándose de esa habilidad suya que, sin el más pequeño margen de error, le permite dejar que sus pensamientos vuelen por encima de las cifras —que se deslizan como aceite— y disfrutar de la sorpresa, no por esperada menos agradable, de comprobar que el milagro de las cuentas se mantiene firme como una roca en el mundo de lo inconcreto. Y también puede suceder a veces que, con el corazón oprimido por la tristeza que inspira meditar sobre los nuevos sistemas, su mano se deslice libro abajo y se sienta embargado por la profunda pena de pensar que los sistemas modernos utilizan mezquinas tarjetas, en lugar de los grandes y pesados libros, y que sustituyen el arte individual por máquinas calculadoras.

Fuera de su profesión, los contables son personas irritables. Porque la frontera entre lo real y lo irreal no se percibe con claridad en parte alguna y quien vive en un mundo de obligaciones concretas no permite que en cualquier otro lugar exista un mundo cualquiera cuyas obligaciones sean incomprensibles e impenetrables para él. Por todo ello, el que se sale o es arrojado de un mundo sólidamente asentado, se vuelve intolerante, se convierte en un fanático apasionado y ascético, sí, se transforma en un rebelde. La sombra de la muerte se cierne sobre él, y el que fue contable —minado por los años— en realidad ya no sirve sino para el pequeño vivir cotidiano propio del jubilado que, cerrado a todo lo exterior y a cualquier hecho fortuito, se limita a regar el césped de su jardín y a contemplar los árboles frutales de su huerto. Pero, si todavía está fuerte y en forma para el trabajo, su vida se convertirá en una lucha agotadora contra una realidad para él irreal. Sobre todo si el destino o una herencia le han colocado en puesto tan arriesgado como el de editor de un periódico, aunque dicho periódico sea solo un insignificante periódico de provincias. Pues probablemente no exista ninguna otra profesión que dependa tanto de lo imprevisto y de lo inseguro como la de director de un periódico, sobre todo en tiempo de guerra, cuando una noticia y su anulación, la esperanza y la desesperación, el valor y la mezquindad se confunden y se mezclan de tal modo que resulta imposible transcribir el conjunto a los libros con el debido orden; cuando solo con ayuda de la censura puede establecerse qué es verdad y qué debe permanecer como no cierto, y cuando cada pueblo vive sumido en su realidad patriótica. Un contable no sirve para ese puesto, y no sirve porque se inclinará por escribir que nuestras esforzadas tropas se encuentran todavía en la orilla izquierda del Marne, esperando la orden de avanzar, cuando en realidad hace ya tiempo que los franceses han ocupado la orilla derecha. Y cuando el censor suprima semejante falsedad, el contable se pondrá furioso —especialmente si es un hombre impulsivo— y le demostrará que el jefe del cuartel general ha comunicado, en efecto, la formación de una cabeza de puente en la orilla izquierda, pero que jamás ha mencionado la retirada de las tropas. Este es un mero ejemplo entre muchos —entre cientos, podría decirse—, y en todos ellos se pone siempre de manifiesto cuán imposible resulta pretender escribir en los anales de la historia con la misma exactitud que, en la notación de los hechos de carácter comercial, constituye la regla primera y primordial. Y se pone asimismo de manifiesto cómo, mediante las incorrecciones de una guerra que se ha convertido en algo incontrolable, se alimenta una rebelión para la que el hombre meticuloso y exacto habría ya tenido motivos más que suficientes en tiempos de paz; rebelión que aquí se convierte en una lucha necesaria e inevitable entre la Administración y la Justicia, una lucha entre dos irrealidades,

entre dos violencias, una lucha que siempre tendrá vigencia, una lucha comparable a la cruzada de Don Quijote contra un mundo que se niega a doblegarse ante las exigencias del espíritu regido por el orden. El contable luchará una y otra vez por lo que es justo, cuando así lo exijan sus libros, y, por un solo pfennig, desencadenará un proceso con todos los requisitos judiciales, y, sin ser en realidad una buena persona, se erigirá en abogado del derecho menospreciado así que haya reconocido y consignado la injusticia y la ilegalidad; furioso e inflexible, permanecerá en su puesto, jinete enjuto que, lanza en ristre, arremeterá una y otra vez en defensa del honor de la cuenta que, en este mundo, debería efectuarse sin el mínimo error de cálculo.

Así pues, el trabajo de redactor del señor Esch no resultaba tan sencillo como cabría suponer. Claro que el periódico quincenal recibía de una agencia de noticias de Colonia todo el material y que, en realidad, el redactor jefe solo tenía que seleccionar de entre las noticias candentes del día las más candentes de todas; escoger, de entre las novelas y los artículos inspirados, los más inspirados de todos y, a lo sumo, obtener por sí mismo los informes locales que, por otra parte, salían en su mayor parte de «otras fuentes». Aunque todo ello era muy simple y se desarrollara con suma facilidad mientras el señor Esch se limitó a llevar la contabilidad de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, contabilidad que él había reorganizado (desde luego no al estilo americano sino al italiano, más modesto), cuando el hasta entonces redactor jefe fue llamado a filas y el señor Esch tuvo que hacerse cargo personalmente de la redacción del periódico, dado su espíritu ahorrativo, típico de un contable, y las dificultades cada vez mayores en que se desarrollaban los acontecimientos, surgieron problemas de todo tipo. ¡Entonces comenzó la lucha!, una lucha en pro de la meticulosa evidencia de los asuntos del mundo y en contra de los falsos y falsificados pliegos de contabilidad que se pretendía divulgar entre la gente; comenzó la lucha contra la Administración, que no toleraba que *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* informara de la verdadera situación del frente y de la retaguardia, o de los levantamientos de los marineros o de la inquietud reinante en las fábricas de armamento, que se negaba a atender las propuestas del periódico para combatir con eficacia semejantes males, más aún, que consideraba sospechoso —cuando solo un malintencionado podría ver nada sospechoso en ello— que el señor Esch recibiera ese tipo de informaciones (se llegó a decir que, dada su condición de extranjero, puesto que era luxemburgués, sería preciso impedirle que ejerciera de redactor; recibió varias advertencias, y sus relaciones con la oficina de censura de Tréveris fueron haciéndose peores de semana en semana). No es, pues, de extrañar que el señor Esch, en lucha él mismo contra el mundo, comenzara a experimentar sentimientos de fraternidad para con las criaturas humilladas y pisoteadas, y que fuera convirtiéndose en un inconformista y un rebelde. Pero no quería reconocerlo.

XI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 1

A las muchas intolerancias y limitaciones que llenaron la época inmediatamente anterior a la guerra, y de las que en la actualidad nos avergonzamos con razón, habría que añadir también la total incomprensión de cualquier fenómeno que cayera fuera del ámbito de un mundo que se juzgaba absolutamente racional. Y dado que entonces se acostumbraba a considerar como obligatoria la cultura occidental y sus formas de pensamiento y, por el contrario, todo lo demás era considerado carente de valor, se tendía con facilidad a incluir en la categoría de subeuropeos o despreciables todos los fenómenos que no correspondieran a una inequívoca racionalidad. Y si bajo la humilde vestidura de la paz y de la imploración surgía algún fenómeno de este tipo, como por ejemplo el Ejército de Salvación, la burla no conocía límites. Solo interesaba lo inequívoco y heroico, en otras palabras, lo estético; se vivía bajo la influencia de un nietzscheísmo mal entendido, aunque la mayoría jamás había oído hablar de Nietzsche, y semejante pesadilla no concluyó hasta que el mundo, saciado de tanta heroicidad, se hartó de ver siempre lo mismo.

En la actualidad, yo me sumo a cualquier reunión del Ejército de Salvación que me encuentre en la calle, deposito encantado algo en su platillo y con frecuencia entablo conversación con los soldados salutistas. Y no porque sus enseñanzas sobre la Salvación me hayan convertido, enseñanzas algo primitivas, sino porque opino que nosotros, encerrados tiempo atrás entre prejuicios, tenemos la obligación ética de reparar nuestros errores en la medida de lo posible, por más que dichos errores tuvieran solo la apariencia de una infamia estética, y, además, podamos argüir como disculpa nuestra extrema juventud de entonces. En cualquier caso, fui adquiriendo conciencia de estos conceptos muy poco a poco, tanto más cuanto que, durante la guerra, era muy raro tropezarse con salutistas. Cierto que a mis oídos había llegado noticia de que desarrollaban una actividad caritativa muy amplia, pero, así y todo, casi me sorprendió encontrar en una de las calles de la periferia de Schöneberg a aquella muchacha salutista.

Es muy probable que yo diera sensación de desaliño y desamparo, ya que mi sorprendida y amistosa

sonrisa la animó a dirigirme la palabra con sumo tacto: me ofreció un folleto de los que llevaba un montón bajo el brazo. Tal vez la hubiera decepcionado que yo me limitara simplemente a comprarlo, por ello dije:

—Lo siento, pero no tengo dinero.

—No importa —respondió—, véngase con nosotros.

Anduvimos a través de varias calles típicas de suburbio, junto a solares sin edificar, y yo hablé de la guerra. Creo que me tomó por un parado o, tal vez, incluso por un desertor que, por una especie de necesidad de confesión, no logra apartarse del tema que le afecta, porque ella, evidentemente, intentaba desviar la conversación. Pero yo seguí hablando de lo mismo y despotricando. ¿Por qué? Ni siquiera hoy podría explicarlo.

De repente nos encontramos perdidos. Habíamos llegado por un camino angosto hasta un complejo fabril y, al dar la vuelta a una esquina, vimos que dicho complejo continuaba hasta muy lejos. Así que torcimos a la izquierda y tomamos por un sendero delimitado por una alambrada inútil y bastante maltrecha —no se comprendía qué pretendían delimitar aquellos alambres de púas, ya que la zona que se extendía tras ellos solo contenía basura e inmundicias, restos de cacharros, regaderas retorcidas e innumerables vasijas que, por razones indescifrables, habían sido depositadas en aquel rincón apartado y de difícil acceso—, sendero que, finalmente, desembocó en campo abierto, no en un auténtico campo, pero campo al fin, que antes de que empezara la guerra o incluso la pasada primavera había sido labrado, como así lo demostraban los endurecidos surcos semejantes a heladas crestas de olas de barro. Era evidente que no habían llegado a sembrarlo. A lo lejos, un tren cruzaba lentamente por la llanura.

Detrás de nosotros quedaban las fábricas y la gran ciudad: Berlín. Nuestra situación no era, por tanto, desesperada, por muy ardientemente que sobre nosotros cayeran los rayos del sol de primeras horas de la tarde. Celebramos conciliábulo sobre lo que podíamos hacer. ¿Continuar andando hasta el pueblo más cercano?

—No podemos presentarnos en ninguna parte así —dije.

Y ella, dócilmente, se sacudió el polvo de su oscura falda de uniforme. De tela como aquella se hacían los uniformes de las cobradoras de tranvía. Era una tela que, con urdimbre de papel, sustituía a la auténtica.

Entonces descubrí una estaca, clavada allí a modo de señal. Nos dirigimos a ella y nos sentamos, por turno, a la delgada sombra que la estaca ofrecía. Apenas hablamos; únicamente de que yo tenía sed. Y, cuando refrescó un poco, regresamos a la ciudad.

XII

Degradación de los valores 1

Esta vida desfigurada, ¿tiene todavía realidad? Y esta hipertrófica realidad, ¿tiene vida aún? El patético gesto de una gigantesca disposición a morir se resuelve en un encogimiento de hombros (ellos no saben por qué mueren; caen en el vacío carentes de realidad y, no obstante, acorralados y asesinados por una realidad que es la suya, pues conciben su causalidad).

Lo irreal es lo ilógico. Y esta época ya no parece capaz de alcanzar mayor grado de ilógica, de antilógica: es como si la monstruosa realidad de la guerra hubiera abolido la realidad del mundo. Lo fantástico se transforma en realidad lógica; sin embargo, la realidad se disuelve en la más ilógica de las fantasmagorías. Una época, cobarde y más doliente que cualquiera de las anteriores, se emborracha de sangre y de gases venenosos; masas de empleados de banca y de traficantes se lanzan contra las alambradas, y un humanitarismo bien organizado nada impide; pero se organiza en Cruz Roja y en la fabricación de miembros artificiales. Las ciudades se mueren de hambre y sacan dinero de su propia hambre, maestros de escuela con gafas dirigen grupos de asalto, los habitantes de las grandes ciudades se alojan en cavernas, los obreros de las fábricas y otros civiles se arrastran en patrullas de reconocimiento y, finalmente, cuando, puesta a salvo la vida, llegan de nuevo a la retaguardia, sus miembros artificiales provocan la aparición de otros traficantes. Deshecha toda forma, en medio de un crepúsculo de opaca inseguridad, tendido sobre un mundo fantasmagórico, el ser humano, al igual que un niño demente, avanza a tientas, asido de los tenues hilos que penden de una lógica cualquiera —pequeña y sin resuello—, y a través de un paisaje de ensueño que llama realidad y que, no obstante, es para él una pesadilla.

El horror patético con que se califica a esta época de insensata y la patética complacencia con que se la tilda de grandiosa se justifican por la hipertrófica capacidad de concepción y falta de lógica de los acontecimientos que, aparentemente, constituyen su realidad. ¡Aparentemente! Porque una época no puede ser jamás insensata o grandiosa, cosas que en todo caso corresponden a un destino individual. Y nuestros destinos individuales son tan normales como siempre lo han sido y lo serán. Nuestro destino colectivo es la suma de nuestros destinos individuales y, conforme a una lógica de calzoncillos, cada una

de esas vidas individuales se desarrolla de forma «normal». A nosotros nos parece insensato el conjunto de los acontecimientos, pero somos capaces de hallar con suma facilidad una motivación lógica para nuestro destino individual. ¿Nos hemos vuelto locos porque no nos hemos convertido en insensatos?

He aquí la gran cuestión: ¿cómo puede el individuo cuya ideología estaría orientada en otras circunstancias hacia otras cosas, comprender —y conformarse con— la ideología y la realidad de la muerte? Podría responderse que, así como así, esto no es cierto para la gran masa, que se ve obligada a actuar, y tal vez sea cierto ahora, debido a la fatiga de guerra, pero ¡siempre ha habido y habrá, como lo hay incluso hoy, un auténtico entusiasmo por la guerra y los tiros! Podría alegarse que el hombre medio, cuya vida transcurre entre la comida y la cama, no posee en absoluto ideología alguna y que por ello es muy fácil ganarlo para la ideología del odio —en cualquier caso, la más clara de las ideologías, tanto si va dirigida contra una nación como contra una clase social— y que, además, una vida así de miserable puesta al servicio de una causa supraindividual, aunque sea una causa destructiva, puede perfectamente recibir el reflejo de un valor vital de índole social. Pero aun suponiendo que ello sea así, esta época poseía no obstante otros y más elevados valores, que le venían de no se sabe dónde, valores de los que el individuo participaba a pesar de su condición de hombre medio; esta época tenía, en alguna parte, un afán puro de saber; tenía, en cierto modo, una voluntad pura de carácter artístico; tenía un sentido social, pese a todo. ¿Cómo puede el ser humano, creador y partícipe de todos estos valores, «comprender» la ideología de la guerra, comprenderla y aceptarla sin rebelarse? ¿Cómo pudo coger un fusil, cómo pudo acudir a las trincheras para morir en ellas o para regresar a su trabajo, sin volverse loco? ¿Cómo es posible tal versatilidad? ¿Cómo pudo la ideología de la guerra hallar eco entre los hombres? ¿Cómo pudieron los hombres comprender algo de una ideología así y de su esfera de realidad? ¡Y todo ello sin mencionar el caso, perfectamente posible por otra parte, de una acogida entusiasta! ¿Pueden ser considerados locos porque no se convirtieron en insensatos?

¿Indiferentes al sufrimiento ajeno?, ¿con la misma indiferencia que permite a un ciudadano cualquiera dormir tranquilo mientras en la cárcel alguien cae bajo la guillotina o sufre garrote vil?, ¿con aquella indiferencia que, un poco más extensiva, permite a la gente que permanece en sus casas no inquietarse lo más mínimo mientras otros miles cuelgan de las alambradas? Ciertamente es la misma indiferencia y, sin embargo, va más allá aún, pues aquí no se trata solamente de una esfera de realidad que se encierra en sí misma —ajena y desligada de todo— frente a otra esfera; de lo que aquí se trata es de la unión del verdugo y de la víctima en un solo individuo, o sea, de que un ámbito único pueda conciliar en su seno los elementos más heterogéneos y de que, a pesar de ello, el individuo pueda moverse dentro de dicho ámbito con absoluta y total naturalidad. No es que se enfrenten la aceptación de la guerra y el rechazo de la misma; tampoco es una transformación del interior del individuo, el cual «mutado», por así decirlo, en un individuo de otra clase a consecuencia de cuatro años de carestía alimentaria, se ha convertido en un extraño, en alguien contrario a sí mismo; es una desintegración de la vida toda y de las vivencias, desintegración que alcanza profundidades mucho mayores que una simple disociación en individuos aislados; es una desintegración que desciende hasta las entrañas de cada individuo y hasta su misma realidad constitutiva.

¡Ay!, conocemos nuestra propia desintegración y no nos atrevemos a interpretarla; queremos hacer responsable de ella al tiempo en que nos ha tocado vivir; pero el tiempo es superpoderoso y no podemos comprenderlo: por ello hablamos de época insensata y grandiosa. Nos consideramos normales porque, sin tener en cuenta la desintegración de nuestra alma, todo se desarrolla en nosotros según motivos lógicos. Si existiera un ser humano en quien todos los acontecimientos de nuestra época se manifestaran simbólicamente y cuyos actos lógicos fueran los acontecimientos de nuestra época, entonces sí, entonces nuestra época ya no sería insensata. Sin duda por ello ansiamos un caudillo que nos proporcione las motivaciones de unos acontecimientos que, sin él, solo podríamos calificar de insensatos.

XIII

Vista desde fuera, la vida de Hanna Wendling habría podido calificarse de ociosa dentro de un orden. Y, por extraño que parezca, también habría podido clasificarse así vista desde dentro. Ella misma, probablemente, no lo habría clasificado de otro modo. Era una vida que, entre el levantarse por la mañana y el acostarse por la noche, pendía como un flácido hilo de seda, flácido y oscilante por falta de tensión. La vida, con la multiplicidad de sus dimensiones, perdía, en este caso especial, una dimensión tras otra; en efecto, apenas llenaba ya las tres dimensiones de su cuarto (podía decirse, y con razón, que los sueños de Hanna Wendling eran más plásticos y tenían más sangre que su estado de vigilia). Pero aunque esta fuera también la opinión de la propia Hanna Wendling, dicha opinión no daba en el blanco, ya que esclarecía simplemente las relaciones macroscópicas de su condición de mujer joven, pero en cambio ignoraba las microscópicas, que son las más importantes: nadie en el mundo conoce la microscópica estructura de su

alma, y es muy probable que tampoco deba conocerla. En el caso de Hanna, por debajo de su visible manera de vivir, totalmente flácida, existía en cada elemento una tensión constante. Si uno pretendiera cortar el más pequeño fragmento de uno de aquellos hilos visiblemente blandos, descubriría en él una torsión inmensa, una convulsión de las moléculas, por así decirlo. Lo que de ello se percibía desde el exterior podría definirse del modo más normal con la palabra nerviosismo, entendiendo este concepto como la guerra de guerrillas que el Yo ha de sostener a cada instante —incluso en los más breves— contra cada una de las partículas de lo empírico con las que su superficie entra en contacto. Pero aunque este fuera —en su sentido más amplio— el caso de Hanna, la peculiar tensión de su ser no radicaba en la nerviosa intransigencia que manifestaba frente a las contingencias de la vida, aunque dichas contingencias consistieran en el polvo que cubría sus zapatos de charol o en las marcas que los anillos dejaban en sus dedos o, simplemente, en una patata mal cocida. No, su tensión no radicaba en estas cosas, pues todo eso venía a ser como una pequeña y rutilante agitación —algo así como el reflejo del sol sobre la superficie ligeramente agitada de las aguas—, algo que, en cierto modo, la preservaba del aburrimiento; no, sin duda no radicaba ahí su tensión, sino en la disconformidad existente entre una superficie de tan variados matices y el fondo inamovible e inconmovible del mar de su alma, fondo que, como una sima, se extendía a tanta profundidad por debajo de todo lo demás que resultaría imposible distinguirlo; era disconformidad entre la superficie visible y la invisible, la que no delimita nada; era aquella disconformidad en cuya infinitud se desarrolla el más inquietante juego del alma; era la distancia inconmensurable entre el anverso y el reverso de la penumbra; una tensión sin equilibrio, una tensión fluctuante, podría decirse, puesto que, de una parte, se encuentra la vida y, de la otra, en cambio, la eternidad, que es el fondo del mar del alma y de la vida misma.

Era una vida vacía, carente de sustancialidad, y, tal vez por ello, una vida intrascendente. El hecho de que fuera la vida de una insignificante esposa de un insignificante abogado de provincias poco importa. Porque, respecto a la particular significación del destino del ser humano, no se ha progresado mucho. Y aunque el peso ético de una mujer que, en una época repleta de los horrores de la guerra, no hace nada tenga poco valor, no hay que olvidar que, de entre todos aquellos que, de grado o por fuerza, asumieron el cumplimiento de los deberes que la guerra impone, muchos, por no decir todos, habrían cambiado gustosos su destino ético por el destino sin ética de una mujer ociosa. Y tal vez —y aunque solo sea «tal vez»— la paralización que, conforme la guerra se recrudecía y se prolongaba, iba apoderándose de Hanna Wendling fuera simplemente la plasmación de un espanto altamente ético frente a los horrores a que se veía expuesta la humanidad. Y puede también que ese espanto hubiera crecido tanto en su espíritu que ni a la propia Hanna Wendling le fuera dado percibirlo.

XIV

Al cabo de unos días, Huguenau fue una tarde a ver de nuevo a Esch.

—Buenos días, señor Esch, ¿qué le parece? El asunto está en marcha.

Esch, que estaba corrigiendo unas pruebas de imprenta, levantó la cabeza:

—¿Qué asunto?

«Imbécil», pensó Huguenau, pero dijo:

—¿Cuál va a ser? El del periódico.

—Ante todo habría que averiguar si yo estoy de acuerdo…

Huguenau comenzó a desconfiar:

—¡Oiga!, no irá usted a dejarme en ridículo… ¿No estará usted en tratos con otros? —Entonces se fijó en la niña, la misma niña que había visto la otra vez ante la puerta de la imprenta—. ¿Es su hija?

—No.

—Bueno, señor Esch, si he de vender su periódico, creo que debería enseñarme las instalaciones…

Esch, con un gran gesto, le mostró el cuarto. Huguenau, intentando animarlo, bromeó:

—Así que la jovencita va incluida…

—No —dijo Esch.

Huguenau no cejó (a decir verdad, no veía muy claro por qué le interesaba tanto todo aquello):

—Pero la imprenta sí que irá incluida… Debería verla.

—¡Por mí! —añadió Esch. Se levantó y cogió a la niña de la mano—. Vamos a la imprenta.

—¿Cómo te llamas? —preguntó Huguenau a la niña.

—Marguerite.

—*Une petite française* —comentó Huguenau en francés.

—No —replicó Esch—, solo su padre es francés.

—Interesante —dijo Huguenau—, ¿y la madre?

Bajaron por la escalera de gallinero.

—La madre ha muerto —dijo Esch en voz baja—. El padre era electricista, aquí, en la fábrica de papel, ahora está internado.

Huguenau movió la cabeza con aire compungido:

—Triste situación, muy triste… ¿Y se ha hecho usted cargo de la niña?

—Usted, por lo visto, quiere saberlo todo.

—¿Yo? No… Pero la niña vivirá en alguna parte…

—Vive con la hermana de su madre —dijo Esch en tono brusco—. Aquí solo viene a comer… Son gente muy pobre.

Huguenau se sintió satisfecho de haber averiguado lo que pasaba.

—*Alors tu es une petite française, Marguerite*.

La niña se lo quedó mirando, el destello de un recuerdo pasó por sus ojos, se soltó de la mano de Esch y se asió a un dedo de Huguenau, pero no contestó.

—No sabe ni una palabra de francés… Hace más de cuatro años que internaron a su padre…

—¿Cuántos años tiene ahora la niña?

—Ocho —contestó ella.

Entraron en la imprenta.

—Esta es la imprenta —dijo Esch—, solo las máquinas y los moldes valen ya varios miles.

—Sistema anticuado —dijo Huguenau, que en su vida había visto una prensa de imprenta.

A la derecha estaba el taller de composición, las viejas y grises cajas tipográficas no le interesaban en absoluto, pero la prensa le gustó. Los ladrillos del suelo, reparados en varios sitios a juzgar por las manchas de cemento, estaban impregnados de aceite en torno a la máquina y oscurecidos. Ahí estaba la prensa, pesada y sólida, con las partes de fundición pintadas de negro, las palancas de hierro forjado relucientes, y con las juntas y los cojinetes provistos de abrazaderas de latón dorado. Un viejo operario de blusón azul frotaba las relucientes barras con un manojo de estopa, sin prestar a los visitantes la menor atención.

—Esto es todo —dijo Esch—… Vámonos. Ven, Marguerite.

Se marchó sin decir adiós y dejó a su invitado sencillamente plantado, sin más cumplidos. Huguenau miró cómo se alejaba semejante grosero y opinó que había hecho bien en marcharse; así podría observarlo todo con absoluta tranquilidad. Sacó su cigarrera, escogió un puro cuya hoja exterior estuviera algo deteriorada y se lo tendió al operario de la prensa.

El operario lo miró con aire interrogativo, pues el tabaco era algo muy raro de ver y un cigarro puro era, desde luego, un buen regalo. Se limpió la mano en el blusón azul, cogió el puro y, como no sabía a ciencia cierta cómo dar las gracias, dijo:

—Esto no es cosa corriente.

—Cierto —respondió Huguenau—. En lo que al tabaco se refiere, las cosas van mal.

—Todo va mal —reafirmó el operario.

Huguenau fue todo oídos:

—Su jefe opina por el estilo.

—Todo el mundo opina igual.

No era la respuesta que Huguenau deseaba oír.

—Bueno, fume usted —le exhortó.

El hombre, usando a modo de cascanueces sus dientes ennegrecidos, mordió la punta del cigarro y lo prendió. Llevaba la camisa desabrochada, y también el blusón, de modo que se le veía la blanca pelambrera del pecho. A Huguenau le hubiera gustado cobrarse de algún modo el cigarro; el operario tenía que contarle algo:

—Una buena prensa, ¿verdad? —le animó.

—Sí, va bien —fue la escueta respuesta.

Dado que la máquina gozaba de todas sus simpatías, Huguenau se sintió ofendido en su nombre por la parquedad del elogio. Como no se le ocurría otra cosa, para romper el silencio, preguntó:

—¿Cómo se llama usted?

—Lindner.

Después callaron definitivamente. Estaba Huguenau pensando en si debía irse o no, cuando de nuevo una mano infantil se asió a su dedo. Marguerite, que iba descalza, había vuelto sin que la oyeran.

—*Tiens* —dijo Huguenau en francés—, *tu lui as échappé*.

La niña alzó sus ojos sin comprender.

—¡Ah!, es verdad, no hablas francés… Vergüenza debería darte. Has de aprenderlo.

La niña hizo con la mano un gesto despectivo, igual al que Huguenau había observado también en Esch:

—El de allá arriba también sabe francés…

La niña había dicho «el de allá arriba».

Huguenau se sintió satisfecho.

—¿No te gusta él? —dijo en voz baja.

Con expresión sombría, la pequeña sacó el labio inferior hacia afuera, pero de pronto se dio cuenta de que Lindner fumaba:

—¡El señor Lindner está fumando!

Huguenau se echó a reír y abrió su cigarrera:

—¿Quieres tú también un puro?

La niña apartó la petaca y contestó lentamente:

—Dame dinero.

—¿Cómo? ¿Quieres dinero? ¿Y para qué necesitas tú dinero?

—Ahora empiezan muy pronto —comentó Lindner.

Huguenau se acercó una silla; colocó a Marguerite entre sus piernas:

—¿Sabes? Yo también necesito dinero.

—Dame dinero —repitió la niña con obstinada lentitud.

—Te compraré caramelos.

La niña calló.

—¿Para qué quieres dinero?

Aunque Huguenau sabía que «dinero» es una palabra importante, que él nunca dejaba de pensar en el dinero, de pronto le fue imposible imaginar qué había bajo esa idea, y tuvo que esforzarse mucho pensando: «¿Para qué se necesita el dinero?».

Marguerite apoyaba las manos encima de sus rodillas y se mantenía muy tiesa entre las piernas de Huguenau.

—¡Bah!, suéltela ya —refunfuñó Lindner, y a Marguerite—: A ver cuándo te vas. La imprenta no es sitio para niños.

Marguerite entornó los ojos con expresión maligna. Volvió a coger el dedo de Huguenau y tiró de este hacia la puerta.

—Calma, calma —dijo Huguenau, al tiempo que se levantaba—. No por mucho madrugar, amanece más temprano, ¿verdad, señor Lindner?

Lindner, sin decir nada, comenzó de nuevo a limpiar la prensa y, de pronto, a Huguenau le pareció que entre la prensa y la niña había un inexplicable parentesco, como si fueran hermanas. Y como si ello pudiera proporcionar a la máquina un consuelo, antes de alcanzar la puerta, dijo con precipitación.

—Te daré veinte pfennigs.

Cuando la niña tendió la mano, volvió a experimentar aquella extraña perplejidad frente al dinero y, con suma precaución, como si se tratara de un secreto que solo a ellos dos les concerniera y del que nadie, ni tan siquiera la prensa, pudiera enterarse, atrajo a la niña hacia sí y se inclinó sobre su oído:

—¿Para qué necesitas dinero?

—Dámelo —dijo la pequeña, y como Huguenau no tuviera aspecto de dárselo, reflexionó con aire sombrío—: Te lo diré. —Y desprendiéndose de sus brazos, lo arrastró hasta la puerta.

Al salir al patio hacía más fresco que antes. Huguenau habría cogido encantado entre sus brazos a aquel pequeño ser cuyo calor acababa de sentir tan cerca; Esch era muy injusto permitiendo que una criatura anduviera descalza de aquí para allá en aquella época del año. Se sentía un tanto violento, y se limpió los cristales de las gafas. Hasta que la niña no volvió a tender la mano diciendo «¡Dámelos!», no volvió a acordarse de los veinte pfennigs. Pero se olvidó de preguntar para qué los quería, abrió el portamonedas y, con las puntas de los dedos, sacó las dos monedas de metal. Marguerite las cogió y echó a correr, y a Huguenau, una vez solo, no se le ocurrió nada mejor que examinar otra vez con atención los edificios y el patio. Luego también él se marchó.

XV

En el preciso momento en que el antiguo reservista Ludwig Gödicke hubo concluido de reunir en torno a su Yo los fragmentos más imprescindibles de su alma, detuvo tan doloroso proceso. A esto podría objetarse que el buen Gödicke había sido toda su vida un ser primitivo y que seguir buscando tampoco le habría ayudado a enriquecerse espiritualmente, ya que nunca, ni siquiera en los momentos cumbre de su vida, había dispuesto de un gran número de elementos para constituir su Yo. Pero esta objeción cae por su base, porque, si no es posible demostrar que Gödicke había sido un ser primitivo y que, en su nueva vida, podía ser calificado de primitivo, aún resulta más imposible suponer materiales mezquinos, fabricados como a hachazos, el alma y el mundo de un ser primitivo. Para comprender lo absurdo de dicha objeción, basta con meditar un poco acerca de la complejidad que, frente a las lenguas de los pueblos cultos, presentan las lenguas primitivas. Así pues, es del todo imposible determinar si el antiguo reservista Gödicke había

escogido entre los fragmentos de su alma con estrechez de miras o no, cuántos había aceptado y cuántos había rechazado en la reconstrucción de su Yo; solo es posible afirmar que vagaba por el mundo con la sensación de que le faltaba algo que alguna vez había formado parte de su ser, algo que, si bien no necesitaba del todo en su nueva vida, era no obstante un elemento que echaba de menos, pese a que, forzosamente, debía negarle la entrada, porque de lo contrario le habría matado.

Y que algo le faltaba era cosa fácil de constatar en la parquedad de sus funciones vitales. Podía andar, aunque con dificultades; podía comer, pero sin ganas, y la evacuación —como todo lo que se relacionaba con su destrozado bajo vientre— le producía penosas fatigas. Tal vez pudiera incluirse entre estas fatigas lo mucho que le costaba hablar, pues con frecuencia experimentaba en el pecho el mismo peso que en sus intestinos: como si la argolla de hierro que le rodeaba el vientre le ciñera también el tórax impidiéndole hablar. Pero esta imposibilidad, esta dificultad total para sacar de él la más insignificante de las palabras, tenía sin duda sus raíces en la parquedad con que había reedificado su Yo, parquedad que, aun permitiéndole los más escasos y míseros cambios de material, no le autorizaba ninguna otra actividad, aunque se limitara al simple aliento que exige una sola palabra, que habría significado un déficit irreemplazable.

Así pues, se paseaba por el jardín apoyado en sus bastones, la larga barba caída sobre el pecho, y sus castaños y profundos ojos que, por encima de las pronunciadas arrugas de las mejillas, brillaban bajo las pobladas y oscuras cejas, fijos en el vacío. Llevaba, indistintamente, la bata del hospital o el capote del uniforme, según la enfermera le preparara la una o el otro, y, con toda seguridad, ni se daba cuenta de que se hallaba en un hospital, ni de que frente a él se extendía una ciudad cuyo nombre ignoraba. El albañil Ludwig Gödicke había construido, por así decirlo, un andamio para el edificio de su alma y, cuando caminaba apoyado en sus bastones, tenía la sensación de ser realmente un andamio ambulante, con toda clase de puntales y jabalcones. No obstante, era incapaz de decidirse a acarrear —mejor dicho, le era imposible —por sí mismo piedras y ladrillos para el edificio. Antes bien, todo cuanto hacía o pensaba hacer, puesto que hacer no hacía nada, se centraba en la tarea de construir dicho andamio como tal, de perfeccionar ese andamio en el que había toda clase de escaleras y de comunicaciones, un andamio que, a medida que pasaban los días, iba haciéndose más y más desconcertante, y por cuya solidez habría que preocuparse, solidez que constituye la finalidad de todo andamio, no por ello menos auténtica, pues del centro del andamio, como de cada una de sus partes sustentadoras, pendía el Yo del constructor Ludwig Gödicke, y era preciso preservarlo del vértigo.

El doctor Flurschütz había pensado muchas veces en confiar aquel hombre a un sanatorio mental. Pero el médico jefe de Estado Mayor, Kuhlenbeck, opinaba que el trauma psíquico era simple consecuencia del sepultamiento que había sufrido y que no obedecía a causa orgánica alguna, por lo que el enfermo lo superaría con el tiempo. Y como poco a poco se había vuelto un paciente silencioso cuyos cuidados no ofrecían ninguna dificultad, se acordó continuar el tratamiento del antiguo reservista hasta que sus fracturas corporales estuvieran curadas del todo.

XVI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 2

Únicamente en verso puede decirse aquello
que absurdo le parece al que habla solo prosa;
que los versos excusan de rígidas razones
y licencia nos dan para cantar mil cosas;
para cantar la angustia que brota de los pechos
en los días fantasmas, tras las noches de vino,
como brotan los himnos que a coro y con su banda
el tenaz Ejército de Salvación entona.
Y con él va Marie por tabernas y calles,
y con él va Marie por Berlín, sin vergüenza;
mal le sienta la ropa salutista y peor
el sombrero de paja de su triste uniforme.
Todavía es muy joven y ya se la ve ajada;
el himno que ella canta, con todo y ser menguado
y parecerle absurdo, lo canta con ahínco,
y el himno le da alas y le imprime entusiasmo.
Marie —ese es su nombre —vive en el viejo hospicio,
donde el olor a agrio invade los pasillos
—olor a col podrida, a hollín de las estufas—,
donde incluso la higiene apesta a carne herida,
donde en pleno verano se tirita de frío,

donde aguardan los viejos sentados en la sala
apestando el ambiente con su fétido aliento
y con sus pies cansados que hieden a sudor.
Aquí vive Marie, aquí en el portal entra,
aquí tiene su cama, entre cuatro tabiques
de madera pardusca, presidida en lo alto
sobre la cabecera, por una cruz de leño;
y aquí, arrodillada, da gracias por sus penas
y llena de impaciencia aguarda su destino,
el que el Crucificado le envíe desde el Cielo.
Aquí duerme Marie; sus noches son sonoras;
pero, por la mañana, se lava en agua fría,
porque el agua caliente fue expulsada de casa.
Aún la luz del cielo de gris anda teñida;
el aire está en silencio y, con frecuencia, es
como una suave vela empapada de agua
que en ocasiones tiembla y en otras pende flácida.
Es la hora en que vanas resultan muchas cosas,
es la hora en que todo carece de esperanza.
¿Quién se siente capaz de esperar la alegría
o de hacer para sí eterno y bello el día?
¿Quién se siente capaz, por más que lo desee,
de entablar la amistad tanto tiempo soñada,
en un día como este, que nace solitario?
Marie prescinde de ello; prepara el desayuno,
barre, limpia y se asoma a la ventana un rato,
y un acto tan sencillo representa el triunfo:
las cosas y la calle respiran Bendición.

XVII

Raras veces iba Hanna Wendling a la ciudad. Odiaba el camino, y no solo la polvorienta carretera, cosa en definitiva comprensible, sino que también odiaba el sendero que corría a lo largo de la orilla del río. No obstante, por él apenas se invertían veinticinco minutos y por la carretera tan solo un cuarto de hora. En el fondo, nunca le había gustado aquel camino, ni siquiera en la época en que iba todos los días a buscar a Heinrich a la salida de la cancillería. Después tuvieron el coche, pero un par de meses nada más, porque enseguida estalló la guerra. Hoy el doctor Kessel la llevaba en su cabriolé a la ciudad.

Iba de compras. Su traje nuevo solo la cubría hasta los tobillos y notaba las miradas de la gente puestas en sus pies. Tenía un gran sentido de la moda; siempre lo había tenido; intuía la moda como quien se despierta a una hora determinada sin necesidad de reloj. Para ella, las revistas de actualidad eran siempre una confirmación posterior. Y el hecho de que la gente mirara sus pies también era en cierto modo una confirmación. Desde luego, hay muchas personas capaces de despertarse puntualmente sin necesidad de despertador, como hay muchas mujeres con un acertado sentido de la inmanente lógica de la moda, pero las personas que poseen tal habilidad se consideran la mayor parte de las veces como únicas en su género. Por ello Hanna Wendling se sentía un tanto orgullosa y, aunque intuía que su orgullo resultaba injustificado, podía observarse en ella un ligero asomo de remordimiento frente a las demacradas mujeres que hacían cola ante las panaderías. Solo al pensar que, con un mínimo sentido de la moda, cada una de aquellas mujeres podría acortarse la falda, cosa que no costaba ningún dinero —la doncella había tardado una hora ni más ni menos, incluyendo el cosido del nuevo dobladillo—, solo entonces el orgullo volvía de nuevo a parecer justificado. Y como el orgullo engendra buen humor, sucedió que a Hanna Wendling ni le molestaron las negras uñas del verdulero ni las moscas que revoloteaban por la tienda, ni tan siquiera se irritó por un momento al comprobar que llevaba los zapatos sucios de polvo. Su forma de caminar lentamente por las calles, deteniéndose frente a este o a aquel escaparate, tenía toda la impronta virginal o monástica —cosa observada con frecuencia durante la guerra— propia de las mujeres por largo tiempo separadas de sus maridos y a los que siguen siendo fieles. Pero como en este momento Hanna Wendling se sentía un poco orgullosa, su rostro aparecía despejado y el suave e indefinible velo que, como precursor de la edad otoñal, se extiende por tales rostros ¡había sido retirado por una mano invisible! Su cara recordaba el primer día de la primavera que sigue a un invierno excesivamente largo.

El doctor Kessel que, antes de subir al hospital militar, efectuaba en la ciudad sus visitas, la llevaría de vuelta a casa. Habían quedado citados frente a la farmacia. Cuando ella llegó, el cabriolé ya estaba allí, y el doctor Kessel charlaba con Paulsen, el farmacéutico. Lo que cabía pensar del farmacéutico Paulsen no era preciso explicárselo a Hanna Wendling, cuya experiencia iba tal vez más allá de aquel caso particular: todos los hombres que se saben engañados por su propia mujer manifiestan ante las demás mujeres una galantería especial y singularmente hueca; no obstante, se sintió halagada cuando él se precipitó a su

encuentro con estas palabras:

—¡Qué encantadora visita! Como un suave día primaveral.

Hanna Wendling que, en ocasiones semejantes, solía apartar de sí a todo el mundo, sin distinciones, hoy, porque se sentía libre y liberada, resultaba accesible incluso a los cumplidos de un rimbombante farmacéutico. Era una oscilación de uno a otro extremo, una oscilación entre la cerrazón total y la absoluta apertura, una falta de moderación de las actitudes, como suele suceder en las personas tensas, y desde luego del todo diferente a la falta de moderación propia de los Papas del Renacimiento; era la ausencia de control y también la vulgaridad de una burguesa que carece de instinto de los valores. Cuando menos, podría afirmarse que, habiendo tomado asiento en el banco de terciopelo rojo de la farmacia, lo que ahora impulsaba a Hanna Wendling a lanzar amistosas y brillantes miradas al farmacéutico Paulsen, concediendo así al lirismo del boticario un sentido en el que ella creía y no creía al mismo tiempo, era una carencia del instinto de los valores. Sí, se enfadó mucho con el doctor Kessel porque él, a quien sus obligaciones reclamaban en el hospital, advirtió que era tiempo de irse, y, cuando ella se sentó a su lado en el coche, su rostro se hallaba de nuevo ensombrecido por un velo.

Durante todo el camino y, luego, también en su casa, habló con monosílabos. Ni ella misma comprendía por qué se resistía tanto a regresar a Frankfurt, a casa de sus padres, mientras durase la guerra. Que en la pequeña población era más fácil procurarse alimentos, que en conciencia no podía dejar sola la casa, que el aire era aquí más sano para el chico, todo ello eran razones aparentes, que solo servían para encubrir aquel extraño estado de distanciamiento, un distanciamiento alienado que era imposible negar. Era «huraña», incluso ella se lo había dicho al doctor Kessel; «huraña» repetía, como si al decirlo pudiera hacer responsable de ello a Heinrich, del mismo modo que le echaba en cara que hubiese dado los morteros de cobre de la cocina para la colecta de metales. Y ese misterioso distanciamiento atañía incluso al muchacho. Cuando se despertaba por las noches, le costaba un gran esfuerzo imaginar que el chico dormía en la habitación contigua, y que era su hijo. Y cuando pulsaba algunas teclas del piano, no era su mano la que lo hacía, sino unos dedos que se habían convertido en extraños y rígidos, y sabía que acabaría por perder incluso la música. Hanna Wendling se dirigió al baño para borrar de su cuerpo la mañana pasada en la ciudad. Se observó con atención en el espejo, intentando averiguar si aquel seguía siendo su rostro. Lo era, pero lo encontró tan velado que, aunque en realidad le gustaba que así fuera, hizo responsable a Heinrich.

Por lo demás, ahora solía sorprenderse a sí misma pensando en su marido como en un nombre lejano y llamándolo para sus adentros tal y como hacía delante de la servidumbre: doctor Wendling.

XVIII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 3

Durante algunas semanas perdí de vista a Marie, la muchacha salutista. Por aquel entonces Berlín se parecía… Sí, ¿a qué o a quién se parecía? Eran días de mucho calor, el asfalto se hallaba reblandecido, a veces resquebrajado y hundido, nada se reparaba, las mujeres llevaban la voz cantante, por disposición del gobierno ejercían funciones, o eran cobradoras de tranvía o trabajaban en cosas semejantes. Los árboles de las calles se veían marchitos ya en primavera, parecían niños con cara de viejo, y el viento, al soplar, levantaba remolinos de polvo y trozos de periódicos. Berlín se había convertido en una ciudad más provinciana, más natural, si se quiere, pero, precisamente por ello, artificial; parecía, por decirlo de algún modo, la copia de sí misma. En la casa donde alquilé una habitación, había dos o tres cuartos ocupados por refugiados judíos procedentes de la región de Lodz; en realidad, nunca pude averiguar ni cuántos eran ni qué lazos les unían. Había viejos con botas altas y rizos en las sienes, y en una ocasión me tropecé con uno que, bajo el caftán, lucía medias blancas hasta las rodillas y zapatos con hebilla, como los que se llevaban en el siglo XVIII. Había hombres que dejaban asomar el caftán mediante un simple y alargado corte en sus chaquetas, y jóvenes de rostros curiosamente lechosos y barbas algodonosas, que parecían postizas como las de teatro. Había alguno que vestía el gris uniforme de campaña, y hasta el uniforme parecía tener algo de caftán. A veces venía un hombre de edad indefinida vestido con un terno de ciudad; su barba, de color castaño, muy recortada, aunque sin afeitar junto a las sienes, le enmarcaba el rostro como al «tío Krüger»; siempre llevaba un bastón y unos quevedos colgando de una cinta negra. Enseguida le tomé por un médico. Naturalmente, también había mujeres y niños, matronas peinadas con postizos, y muchachas que vestían según una curiosa moda.

Con el tiempo fui cazando alguna palabra del yiddish alemán que hablaban. Claro que, lo que se dice entenderlo, no llegué a entenderlo jamás. Pero a ellos les parecía imposible, pues, cuando nos cruzábamos, interrumpían los gruñidos guturales que tan extraños parecían en boca de dignos ancianos y me miraban con timidez. Casi todas las noches se sentaban a oscuras en sus cuartos y, por las mañanas, cuando yo

atravesaba el vestíbulo, lleno de vestimentas de todo tipo, y donde la criada limpiaba los zapatos, veía con frecuencia junto a la ventana a uno de los más viejos. Ceñidas en torno a la frente y a las muñecas llevaba las filacterias, movía el busto al ritmo del cepillado de los zapatos y, besando de tanto en tanto los flecos de su manto ritual, pronunciaba frente a la ventana abierta, y con labios marchitos y febriles, palabras febriles y marchitas. Tal vez porque la ventana daba al este.

Me sentía tan atraído por el ir y venir de los judíos, que dedicaba muchas horas del día a observarlos. De las paredes del vestíbulo colgaban dos grabados que reproducían escenas típicas del rococó, y no pude evitar preguntarme si ellos podrían reconocer aquellos cuadros, y otras cosas, y mirarlos con los mismos ojos que nosotros. Y, entregado a estas observaciones, me olvidé de Marie, la muchacha salutista, pese a que, en cierto modo, la relacionaba con todo aquello.

XIX

El brazo del teniente Jaretzki había sido amputado. Por encima del codo. Kuhlenbeck hacía las cosas a conciencia. Lo que quedaba de Jaretzki se hallaba sentado en el jardín del hospital, sentado junto a los árboles, contemplando el manzano en flor.

Inspección del comandante de la plaza.

Jaretzki se puso en pie, intentó cogerse la mano enferma, fue un gesto en vano. Luego permaneció en posición de firmes.

—Buenos días, teniente, ¿de nuevo sano y salvo?

—A sus órdenes, mayor. La verdad es que me falta un buen trozo.

Se diría que el mayor Von Pasenow se sentía responsable del brazo de Jaretzki, porque dijo:

—Mala guerra esta… ¿No prefiere sentarse, teniente?

—Con todo respeto, gracias mi comandante.

—¿Dónde le hirieron a usted?

—No me hirieron, mi comandante… Fueron los gases.

El mayor miró el muñón del brazo de Jaretzki:

—No comprendo… Los gases producen la muerte por asfixia…

—Tienen efectos secundarios, mi comandante.

El mayor permaneció unos minutos pensativo. Luego dijo:

—Un arma indigna de caballeros.

—Desde luego, mi comandante.

Ambos pensaron que también Alemania usaba aquellas armas indignas de caballeros, pero no lo dijeron. El mayor preguntó:

—¿Cuántos años tiene usted?

—Veintiocho, mi comandante.

—Al principio de la guerra, todavía no se usaban los gases.

—No, mi comandante, creo que no.

El sol bañó con sus rayos el largo muro amarillo del hospital. En el cielo flotaban algunas nubes blancas. La gravilla del paseo se hundía con fuerza en la tierra negra y por la linde del césped se arrastraba una lombriz de tierra.

El manzano era como un grandioso ramillete de colores claros.

Vistiendo su bata blanca, el médico jefe de Estado Mayor salió del edificio y se les acercó. El mayor dijo:

—Le deseo un pronto restablecimiento.

—Gracias, con todo respeto, mi comandante —dijo Jaretzki.

XX

Degradación de los valores 2

Tal vez el horror de esta época se haga evidente con mayor claridad en las experiencias arquitectónicas. Siempre vuelvo a casa arrastrando conmigo un cansancio gris cuando he estado andando por las calles. No preciso observar una a una las fachadas de las casas; me producen malestar sin necesidad de alzar mis ojos hacia ellas. A veces busco refugio en las construcciones nuevas, tan elogiadas, pero, con su gótico —y seguro que no soy justo—, los almacenes de Messel, un gran arquitecto sin duda, me resultan algo grotesco, algo que me irrita y me cansa. Me cansa tanto que apenas si soy capaz de recuperarme contemplando los grandes edificios clasicistas. Y, no obstante, me gusta la grandiosa claridad de la

arquitectura de Schinkel.

Estoy seguro de que en épocas anteriores jamás el hombre había contemplado con asco y repugnancia las obras arquitectónicas; esta experiencia nos ha sido reservada a nosotros. Hasta el neoclasicismo, construir constituía una función natural. Es posible que el hombre ni tan siquiera notara los edificios nuevos, como tampoco se da uno cuenta de que han plantado un nuevo árbol, pero, si los veía, entonces sabía que algo bueno y natural había sucedido. Así es como Goethe veía aún las construcciones de su época.

No, no soy un esteta ni lo he sido nunca, seguro, por mucho que determinados hechos hayan podido provocar esta sensación, y tampoco me mueve un sentimentalismo nostálgico hacia el pasado ni la aureolada visión de épocas pretéritas. No, detrás de todo mi asco y mi cansancio se oculta una idea ya vieja y muy bien fundada: la idea de que nada hay más importante para una época que su estilo. Cualquier época de la humanidad que se haya caracterizado por algo que no sea su estilo, sobre todo su estilo arquitectónico, no merece el nombre de época, y no lo merecerá hasta que sea dueña de un estilo propio.

Se me puede objetar que mi cansancio y mi irritabilidad obedecen a una pésima alimentación; se me puede decir que esta época tiene su estilo expreso en el hormigón armado, las máquinas y los cañones; se me puede asegurar que solo las generaciones venideras comprenderán el estilo de esta época. ¡De acuerdo! Todas las épocas poseen un estilo, no importa cuál, por insignificante que sea, incluso los años de creación del Imperio alemán tuvieron un estilo propio, pese a todo su eclecticismo. Más aún, admito que la voluntad de estilo ha sido sencillamente desbordada por la técnica, que los nuevos materiales no han sido usados todavía según todas sus adecuadas formas de expresión y que, de momento, toda esta intranquilizadora desproporción no es sino una finalidad que no ha alcanzado sus objetivos. De todos modos, nadie me podrá negar que, ya sea por los nuevos materiales, ya sea por la incapacidad de las personas, el nuevo estilo arquitectónico ha perdido algo, sí, algo que ha desechado a ciencia y conciencia y con absoluta razón: el rasgo distintivo de lo ornamental. Desde luego, afirmando que hasta ahora no se había construido adecuándose a los materiales y que, hoy, es posible prescindir de lo ornamental por superfluo, se puede considerar esto —y hasta ensalzarlo— como una virtud. Pero la expresión «adecuándose a los materiales», ¿no es simplemente un tópico moderno? ¿Acaso el gótico u otro estilo cualquiera no construyeron de acuerdo con los materiales del momento? El que considera lo ornamental como algo accesorio no ha comprendido con claridad la lógica interna de una construcción. El concepto «estilo arquitectónico» es pura lógica, una lógica que penetra el conjunto de la obra construida, que abarca desde los planos hasta el alzado y, dentro de esta lógica, lo ornamental es lo último, la expresión diferencial, en lo pequeño, de la idea básica, única y unificada, del conjunto. Tanto si se trata de incapacidad para la ornamentación como si se pretende rechazarla, ambas cosas significan lo mismo, no quieren sino decir que las formas de expresión arquitectónica de esta época se diferencian vivamente de todos los estilos anteriores.

No obstante, ¿de qué sirve este punto de vista? Ni es posible crear formas ornamentales mediante el eclecticismo ni es posible lograr artificialmente nuevas formas sin caer en la extravagancia pictórica de un Van der Velde. Lo que permanece es una profunda inquietud, inquietud y certidumbre de que este estilo arquitectónico, que no lo es en realidad, representa simplemente un síntoma, el *memento* de un estado de espíritu que tiene que ser la negación del espíritu de esta época que, a su vez, es negación de época. Y verlo me cansa. Si pudiera, jamás volvería a salir de mi casa.

XXI

Aparte de que la comida en la hospedería era cara y de que él no quería permitirse esos lujos antes de haber encontrado una nueva forma de ganarse la vida, Huguenau tenía la firme impresión de que, si se dejaba ver con frecuencia por el mayor, podía malograr el asunto que se traía entre manos. Hacer más gestiones podría ser contraproducente, y parecía mucho más conveniente que el mayor se olvidara de él hasta el encuentro del viernes. Así pues, Huguenau comió en una fonda humilde y no apareció por el comedor de la hospedería hasta el viernes por la noche.

No se había equivocado. Allí estaba el mayor, que, cuando él se acercó y, de forma premiosa pero cordial, volvió a darle las gracias por el honor que le hacía con su amable invitación, se mostró altamente sorprendido.

—Claro, claro —dijo el mayor, cayendo al fin en la cuenta—, le presentaré a esos caballeros.

Huguenau le dio las gracias y tomó asiento, discretamente, en otra mesa. Pero, cuando el mayor concluyó de cenar y alzó la vista, Huguenau le sonrió levantándose un poco, como para indicar que estaba a sus órdenes. Juntos se dirigieron a una pequeña habitación contigua, donde los señores más importantes de la burguesía local solían reunirse los viernes.

Ya estaban todos reunidos, incluso el alcalde estaba con ellos. Huguenau no pudo retener todos los

nombres. En cuanto entró, tuvo la sensación de que le acogían con simpatía y presintió que el éxito sería completo. Y su corazón no le engañaba. La mayoría de aquellos señores ya sabía de su presencia en la ciudad y en la hospedería: había sido frecuente tema de conversación y, según le contó después a Esch, sus manifestaciones fueron acogidas con vivo interés. La velada concluyó con resultados extraordinariamente positivos.

En definitiva, no era de extrañar. Aquellos señores tenían la impresión de participar en un conciliábulo secreto y, al propio tiempo, constituían una especie de tribunal de la santa Vehme[1] encargado de juzgar al rebelde Esch. Y si Huguenau halló a su auditorio tan favorablemente dispuesto a escucharle, no se debía solo a su firme voluntad de ganárselos, ni tampoco a su sonámbula seguridad, sino al hecho de que él no era un rebelde, sino al contrario, alguien que se preocupaba de sí mismo y de su bolsillo, o sea, que se debía también a que hablaba un idioma que todos comprendían.

A Huguenau le hubiera sido fácil conseguir que aquellos señores suscribieran los veinte mil marcos que pedía Esch. Pero no lo hizo. Una especie de más que oculto temor le advertía que todo debía mantenerse en el terreno de lo eventual y de lo aún por realizar, porque la auténtica seguridad financiera flota más allá o por encima de las vaguedades, y porque una solvencia en exceso amplia resulta tan peligrosa como cualquier otro crédito inexplicable. Esto puede parecer absurdo; no obstante, ante cualquier hecho absurdo cabe la posibilidad de pensar algo sensato, y así fue como Huguenau pensó con gran sensatez en aquello, lo que, cosa curiosa, le llevó a una conclusión idéntica: si él pidiera o aceptara de estos señores una suma de dinero excesiva, a alguno podría ocurrírsele exigirle documentos que le acreditaran; en cambio, si él se mostraba distante y rechazaba participaciones demasiado elevadas, reservando así la parte más importante de las consignaciones para su propio grupo (legendario), quedaría fuera de duda que en él tenían al exponente de los grupos industriales del imperio poseedores de los capitales más fuertes (Krupp). Y, realmente, nadie dudó y, al final, incluso el mismo Huguenau llegó a creérselo. Quedó bien sentado que le era imposible conceder a tan honorables caballeros una participación superior a un tercio de los veinte mil marcos en cuestión, o sea, seis mil seiscientos marcos en total; no obstante, él se hallaba dispuesto a hablar con su grupo para ver si se contentaba con una sencilla mayoría del cincuenta y uno por ciento, en lugar de dos tercios, y, además, tomaba encantado buena nota de ello, con vistas a ulteriores ampliaciones de capital; de momento, y por mucho que él lo lamentara, los caballeros tendrían que conformarse con esa pequeña suma.

Era una noticia poco agradable para los caballeros, pero nada se podía hacer para evitarlo. Se acordó que, en cuanto Huguenau hubiera efectuado la compra de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, se extenderían acciones provisionales a cambio de los pagos, y que, tras nuevos intercambios de opinión con el grupo central, la empresa adoptaría la forma de una sociedad limitada o de una sociedad anónima. Se acordaron las futuras reuniones del consejo de administración, y la velada concluyó con vivas a los ejércitos aliados y a su majestad el emperador.

XXII

En cuanto Huguenau se despertó, metió la mano debajo de la almohada; allí solía guardar su cartera durante la noche. Experimentaba la agradable sensación de hallarse en posesión de veinte mil marcos y, aunque sabía que en la cartera ni tan siquiera tenía los seis mil seiscientos que, tras la compra de *El Mensajero*, recibiría de los respetables señores del lugar, y que dentro solo quedaba un resto de ciento ochenta y cinco marcos, imaginaba que eran veinte mil. Poseía veinte mil marcos y se acabó.

En contra de su costumbre, permaneció echado en la cama. Si tenía veinte mil marcos, dárselos a Esch porque este exigía tanto a cambio de un periódico de mierda, era una insensatez. Todo precio lleva consigo un regateo, y él regatearía con Esch; Esch podía estar seguro de ello. Con catorce mil marcos el periódico estaría pagado de sobra, y esto representaba un beneficio personal de seis mil marcos. Solo es preciso maniobrar con habilidad para que Esch no caiga en la cuenta de que no recibirá íntegros los veinte mil. Puede hablarse de una reserva de capital o de que el grupo industrial se contenta, de momento, con una mayoría simple, en lugar de la cualificada mayoría de dos tercios, o de algo por el estilo. ¡Ya se le ocurriría alguna cosa! Y Huguenau saltó satisfecho de la cama.

Era todavía muy temprano cuando se encaminó a la redacción del periódico, y apabulló al desconcertado señor Esch con los más violentos reproches por culpa de su mala fama. Era espantoso todo lo que él, Wilhelm Huguenau, que al fin y al cabo no era responsable de los actos del señor Esch, había tenido que oír durante aquellos días respecto al periódico. En su calidad de agente, tendría que haberle resultado indiferente, pero le partía el corazón, sí, se le hacía muy penoso ver cómo un buen negocio se hundía voluntariamente; un periódico vive de su fama y, si su fama se va al traste, al traste también se va el periódico. Tal y como están las cosas, el señor Esch ha conseguido que vender *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* se convierta en un asunto más que difícil.

—Ha de comprender con toda claridad, querido señor Esch, que usted, en lugar de pedir dinero a quien quiera hacerse cargo del periódico, debería dárselo.

Esch se hallaba consternado; después hizo una mueca despectiva. No por ello perdió Huguenau la calma:

—No hay de que sonreír, querido amigo Esch. La cosa es muy seria, mucho más seria probablemente de lo que usted supone.

Ni hablar se podía de rentabilidad y si, a pesar de todo, uno se empeñaba en buscar la parte rentable, solo se conseguiría con sacrificios inauditos, sí, sacrificios, mi querido señor Esch. Si por casualidad él encontraba entre sus amigos —como esperaba y quería esperar— un grupo de hombres dispuestos a sacrificarse para sacar adelante un asunto tan por completo insensato, lo que es puro idealismo, el señor Esch podría decir que había tenido suerte, una suerte como quizá solo se da una vez en la vida, ya que, gracias a circunstancias particularmente favorables y a sus denodados esfuerzos como mediador, aún conseguiría para Esch un beneficio de diez mil marcos y, si Esch no se avenía a ello, sentiría muchísimo haberse ocupado inútilmente de sus asuntos que, por cierto, no eran de su incumbencia.

—Entonces, déjelo correr —gritó Esch, al tiempo que daba un golpe sobre la mesa.

—Como quiera. Desde luego puedo dejarlo correr, pero… Lo que no comprendo es por qué se indigna usted tanto al ver que no se aceptan lisa y llanamente sus disparatadas pretensiones respecto al precio.

—Yo no he dicho ningún disparate… Veinte mil por este periódico es un precio de amigo.

—Pero ¿no se da usted cuenta de que se acepta incluso su valoración? Usted mismo admite que, para reformar el periódico, habrá que enterrar otros diez mil… y treinta mil marcos ya es un precio exagerado, ¿no le parece?

Esch quedó pensativo. Huguenau intuyó que iba por buen camino:

—Bien, veo que empieza usted a ponerse en razón… Naturalmente, yo no quiero presionarle… Puede consultarlo con la almohada…

Esch caminaba arriba y abajo. Luego dijo:

—Me gustaría discutirlo con mi mujer.

—Discútalo, tómese todo el tiempo que quiera… pero no lo piense demasiado… El dinero contante y sonante puede sonreírnos, pero no espera. —Se puso en pie—. Volveré mañana a saber qué ha decidido… Entretanto, preséntele mis respetos a su distinguida esposa.

XXIII

El doctor Flurschütz y el teniente Jaretzki salieron del hospital camino de la ciudad. La calle estaba llena de baches y de socavones, causados por los camiones que circulaban con neumáticos metálicos porque ya no había caucho.

Una fábrica de cartón embreado para techumbres, en paro forzoso, alzaba en el silencioso aire de la mañana sus delgadas y negras chimeneas de palastro. En el bosque cantaban los pájaros.

Jaretzki llevaba una manga sujeta con un imperdible en el bolsillo de la guerrera de su uniforme.

—Es curioso —dijo—, desde que me libré del izquierdo, el derecho me pesa mucho más… Casi preferiría que también me lo cortaran.

—Es usted un hombre muy simétrico… Los ingenieros tienen un sentido especial de la simetría.

—¿Sabe una cosa, Flurschütz? A veces se me olvida por completo que he tenido una profesión… Usted no puede comprenderlo, ha seguido practicando la suya.

—Bueno, no exactamente… yo era más biólogo que médico.

—He solicitado un empleo en la Compañía General de Electricidad; ahora en todas partes hace falta personal… Pero no acabo de imaginarme otra vez frente a un tablero de dibujo… ¿Cuántos muertos cree usted que ha habido en total?

—No sé, cinco millones, diez millones… veinte tal vez cuando esto acabe.

—Estoy convencido de que esto jamás acabará… Seguirá así eternamente.

El doctor Flurschütz se detuvo:

—Dígame, Jaretzki, ¿le parece comprensible que, mientras aquí nos paseamos con toda tranquilidad y, pese a todo, la vida continúa pacíficamente, a un par de kilómetros de nosotros se estén divirtiendo con el estruendo de los cañonazos?

—Hay tantas cosas que me parecen incomprensibles… Por cierto, nosotros dos ya hemos recibido nuestra ración…

El doctor Flurschütz se llevó maquinalmente la mano a la cicatriz del balazo que tenía en la frente, debajo de la visera de la gorra:

—No me refería a esto… Esto fue al principio, cuando la gente se lanzó porque sentía vergüenza… No, ahora, no. Es como para volverse loco.

—¡Solo faltaría eso…! No, gracias, prefiero emborracharme…

—Receta que cumple usted al pie de la letra, a decir verdad.

El viento les trajo el olor a brea procedente de la fábrica de cartón embreado para techumbres, en paro forzoso.

El doctor Flurschütz, delgado y encorvado, con su perilla rubia y sus quevedos, vestido de uniforme tenía un aspecto algo confuso. Callaron un buen rato.

La calle descendía. Las casas, aisladas y de una sola planta, construidas en los últimos tiempos en esta zona situada frente a las puertas de la ciudad, se alineaban produciendo una impresión de paz. En todos los jardincillos delanteros se cultivaban menguadas hortalizas.

—No es agradable vivir todo el año con este olor a brea —dijo Jaretzki.

—He estado en Rumania y en Polonia… Mire, en todas partes hay casas así, con esta paz… con los mismos letreros, MAESTRO ALBAÑIL, CERRAJERO… Y en las tablas de una trinchera, cerca de Armentières, se veía un rótulo que decía *TAILLEUR POUR DAMES*, tal vez sea ridículo, pero fue allí donde de verdad me impresionó por primera vez esta locura.

—Ahora, con un solo brazo, quizá podría entrar como ingeniero en cualquier organización del ejército.

—¿Le gustaría más que entrar en la Compañía General de Electricidad?

—No tengo preferencias, de veras… Tal vez vuelva al frente con mi brazo único… Para tirar granadas basta con uno… Ayúdeme a encender el cigarrillo.

—¿Cuánto lleva bebido hoy, Jaretzki?

—¿Yo? No vale la pena contarlo; apenas nada esperando invitarle a usted ahora a unos tragos.

—Bueno, ¿y qué hay de la Compañía General de Electricidad?

Jaretzki se rió:

—Se lo diré honestamente: el intento sentimental de recuperar los caminos de la burguesía, de tener un futuro, no seguir deambulando, casarse… pero usted cree en todo eso tanto como yo.

—¿Y por qué no he de creer?

Jaretzki sacudió rítmicamente el cigarrillo:

—Porque… la… guerra… nunca… podrá… acabar… ¿Cuántas veces tendré que repetírselo?

—No deja de ser una solución —dijo Flurschütz.

—La única solución.

Habían llegado a las puertas de la ciudad. Jaretzki apoyó el pie en el bordillo, sacó los guantes del bolsillo y, con el cigarrillo torcido en los labios, se sacudió de los zapatos el polvo de la carretera. Después se alisó el oscuro bigote y, cruzando el fresco arco del portalón, penetraron en la silenciosa y larga calleja.

XXIV

Degradación de los valores 3

El predominio del estilo arquitectónico sobre las características de una época es una de las cosas más extrañas. ¡Qué privilegiada situación han conservado sobre todo las artes plásticas en el seno de la historia! Comparadas con la magnitud de las actividades humanas que puebla una época, apenas constituyen un ínfimo detalle, detalle que, por supuesto, ni siquiera es demasiado intelectual, pero que, no obstante, supera con fuerza de caracterización a todos los demás ámbitos intelectuales, supera a la poesía, supera incluso a la ciencia, supera incluso también a la religión. Lo que a través de los milenios perdura es el arte plástico constructivo, ese es el exponente de una época y de su estilo. Semejante hecho puede depender de la perdurabilidad de los materiales empleados: de los siglos pasados se conservan montañas de documentos escritos y, sin embargo, cada una de las estatuas góticas es «más medieval» que toda la literatura de la Edad Media. Bueno, esta sería una explicación muy mediocre; si existe una posible explicación, hay que buscarla en la esencia del concepto «estilo».

Pues no cabe duda de que el estilo no solo atañe a la arquitectura o a las artes plásticas, el estilo es algo que atraviesa de igual modo todas las manifestaciones de la vida de una época. Sería absurdo hablar del artista como de un hombre fuera de lo común, como de alguien que, dentro de un estilo que produce, lleva una existencia especial, mientras los demás permanecen excluidos.

No, el estilo, si existe, atraviesa todas las manifestaciones vitales, de modo que el estilo de un período aparece tanto en el pensamiento como en cualquier otro acto que realicen los hombres de dicho período. Y solo partiendo de este hecho —que tiene que ser así porque no puede ser de otro modo— es posible buscar una explicación al sorprendente hecho de que hayan sido precisamente aquellas acciones que se manifiestan en el espacio las que han adquirido un significado tan ostensible y extraordinario en el auténtico sentido de la expresión.

Reflexionar acerca de ello sería tal vez ocioso, si no existiera detrás el único problema que legitima

todo este filosofar: el miedo a la nada, el miedo al tiempo que conduce a la muerte. Y quizá toda la inquietud que surge de la mala arquitectura, y que me impulsa a agazaparme en mi casa, no sea otra cosa que este mismo miedo. Pues todo cuanto el hombre realiza, lo realiza para destruir el tiempo, para abolirlo, y a esta aniquilación se llama espacio. Incluso la música, que existe en el tiempo y que lo colma, transforma el tiempo en espacio. El pensamiento todo se desarrolla en lo espacial, y el proceso del pensamiento presenta un confusionismo de espacios indeciblemente enmarañados y pluridimensionales: esta es la teoría que posee más visos de probabilidad. Pero, si ello es así, debería estar naturalmente muy claro que todas aquellas manifestaciones que de un modo directo afectan al espacio reciben una significación y una evidencia como las que nunca jamás ha recibido ninguna otra actividad humana. Y también en esto se trasluce la sintomática significación de lo ornamental. Porque lo ornamental, libre de toda forma intencional — aunque haya surgido de ella—, se convierte en expresión abstracta, en «fórmula» de todo el pensamiento espacial; llega a ser la fórmula misma del estilo y, con ello, la fórmula de toda una época y de su forma de vida.

Y ahí me parece que radica aquella significación, casi me atrevería a decir mágica, que convierte en muy singular el hecho de que una época, prisionera por completo de la muerte y del infierno, tenga que vivir dentro de un estilo que es incapaz de continuar produciendo lo ornamental.

XXV

Si, por aquel entonces, la construcción de una casa no hubiera figurado entre sus aspiraciones, es muy posible que Hanna Wendling no se hubiera enamorado del joven abogado de provincias. Pero en el año 1910, las muchachas de la mejor burguesía leían *Studio*, *Decoración interior*, *Arte y decoración alemanes*, tenían en sus casas el libro *Muebles de estilo en Inglaterra* y mezclaban íntimamente sus ideas eróticas acerca del matrimonio con los problemas arquitectónicos. La casa Wendling o la CASA DE LAS ROSAS, como podía leerse en el hastial escrito con caracteres barrocos, correspondía en una modesta proporción a dichos ideales; tenía el tejado muy inclinado; junto a la entrada de la casa, unas figuritas de cerámica representaban los símbolos del amor y de la fecundidad; poseía un vestíbulo inglés con chimenea enmarcada con ladrillos vistos y, en la repisa de la misma, varios objetos de cobre. Había costado grandes esfuerzos —y también alegrías— colocar todos los muebles de la forma más adecuada para que en todas partes reinara un equilibrio arquitectónico perfecto; y cuando todo estuvo terminado, Hanna Wendling tuvo la sensación de que únicamente ella conocía bien la perfección de dicho equilibrio, aunque Heinrich hubiera intervenido en todo y aunque buena parte de su felicidad conyugal radicara en compartir dicho conocimiento relativo a la secreta armonía y al contrapunto de la distribución de los cuadros y de los muebles.

Pues bien, desde entonces los muebles no se habían cambiado de sitio; al contrario, se evitaba celosamente variar en un solo milímetro el plan primitivo. No obstante, algo había cambiado. ¿Qué había sucedido?, ¿puede deteriorarse el equilibrio?, ¿puede desgastarse la armonía? Al principio, Hanna no se dio cuenta de que tras esto se ocultaba una ausencia de participación: lo positivo había simplemente caído en lo neutro, y hasta que no degeneró en lo negativo no resultó evidente. No era que la casa o la distribución de los muebles se le hubieran hecho de pronto odiosas —esto habría podido remediarse, de llegar el caso, cambiando la distribución del mobiliario—; no, era algo mucho más profundo, era la maldición de la contingencia y del amontonamiento que se había cernido sobre las cosas sin que fuera posible planear otra distribución menos arbitraria y contingente que la actual. En el fondo, y sin lugar a dudas, existía cierta confusión, determinada tenebrosidad y un peligro, en especial porque no se veía razón alguna que garantizara que la inseguridad arquitectónica no se hiciera extensiva a los asuntos del sentimiento o incluso a las cuestiones de la moda. Esto provocaba un curioso miedo y, aunque Hanna Wendling sabía muy bien que había cosas mucho más importantes y serias, dichas cosas no le resultaban tal vez tan angustiosas como pensar que incluso las revistas dedicadas a la moda llegarían a perder su encanto y que el día menos pensado uno podría leer *Vogue*, el *Vogue* inglés que tanto escaseaba en aquellos cuatro años de guerra, sin arrobamiento, sin interés, sin apenas comprenderlo.

Cuando se sentía asaltada por semejantes ideas, las calificaba de imaginaciones, pero en realidad eran pensamientos más prosaicos que fantásticos, pensamientos llenos de una especie de desilusión hija de su fantasía solo en la medida en que se trataba de la desilusión subsiguiente a una embriaguez, y que respondía a un estado prosaico y casi normal, estado que se veía sometido a una nueva desilusión para, por así decirlo, ser más normal cada vez hasta caer en lo negativo. Naturalmente, tales apreciaciones son relativas hasta cierto punto; los límites entre la sobriedad y la embriaguez no siempre están bien definidos, y si puede llamarse embriaguez al amor por la humanidad de los rusos, o si puede aplicarse este término a las relaciones normales entre seres humanos, o si, por el contrario, la visión global de las cosas puede considerarse sobriedad son, en último término, cuestiones imposibles de determinar. Sin embargo, no es

imposible que la sobriedad pueda alcanzar un estado de entropía o un cero absoluto, cero absoluto al que necesaria e inevitablemente tienden todas las relaciones humanas. Y el hecho de que Hanna Wendling se hallara en este camino tenía bastantes visos de realidad y, en principio, obedecía tal vez a su afán de adelantarse a la moda: la entropía del ser humano es su aislamiento absoluto y lo que anteriormente el hombre había llamado armonía y equilibrio era verosímilmente una imagen, imagen forjada a la fuerza a partir de las estructuras sociales de las que formaba parte. Pero a medida que el hombre va convirtiéndose en un ser solitario, las cosas se aíslan y se desmoronan cada vez más a su alrededor y, en consecuencia, las relaciones entre las cosas han de serle más indiferentes, tanto que al final apenas puede ni tan siquiera verlas. Así pues, Hanna Wendling caminaba por su casa, paseaba por su jardín, andaba por los caminos empedrados al estilo inglés, y ya no veía ni la arquitectura ni los diferentes recodos de los blancos caminos, y aunque esto hubiera podido ser sumamente doloroso, ya apenas lo era, puesto que resultaba algo inevitable.

XXVI

Huguenau iba con frecuencia a la calle Fischer a charlar con el señor Esch. Siguiendo una costumbre profesional muchas veces practicada, no hacía alusión ninguna al asunto que le llevaba allí y, esperando que su interlocutor iniciara la conversación al respecto, él hablaba del tiempo, de las cosechas y de las victorias. Cuando notaba que Esch no quería hablar de las victorias, dejaba las victorias a un lado y se limitaba a hablar del tiempo.

En el patio encontraba a veces a Marguerite. La niña se había familiarizado con él, se colgaba de su dedo y quería volver a la imprenta. Huguenau le decía:

—Vaya, vaya, crees que así te ganarás otros veinte pfennigs, pero tío Huguenau no es todavía lo bastante rico. Todas las cosas necesitan su tiempo.

Sin embargo, le regalaba diez pfennigs para la hucha.

—Bueno, y ¿qué haremos cuando los dos seamos ricos? —le dijo un día.

La niña no respondió. Se quedó mirando el suelo y, finalmente, dijo indecisa:

—Irnos.

A Huguenau, por alguna razón, esto le resultó agradable:

—O sea que para eso necesitas el dinero… Bueno, pues cuando seamos ricos podremos viajar juntos… Te llevaré conmigo.

—Sí —dijo Marguerite.

Si él subía a ver a Esch, la niña se deslizaba casi siempre detrás, se sentaba en el suelo y escuchaba. O por lo menos se reía mirando hacia la puerta. Entonces Huguenau decía, en parte porque era mejor tema de conversación:

—Me gustan los niños.

Esto parecía ser del agrado de Esch, pues su rostro se iluminaba con una sonrisa:

—Esta es una pícara… Sería capaz de matarle a uno.

«*Haïssez les Prussiens*», pensó Huguenau sin poder evitarlo, aunque Esch era luxemburgués y no prusiano. Esch prosiguió:

—A veces pienso en adoptar a esa picaruela… Nosotros no tenemos hijos.

Huguenau se sorprendió:

—Pero un niño ajeno…

—Ajeno o propio… es exactamente igual… porque, si no, resulta insoportable.

Huguenau rió:

—Sí, claro; con los propios tampoco se sabe nunca.

—Su padre ha sido internado… Yo le he dicho a mi mujer que podríamos adoptarla… Es prácticamente huérfana.

—Hum…, pero entonces debería usted ocuparse de ella.

—Naturalmente —dijo Esch.

—Si dispusiera usted de algún dinero o lo obtuviera, por ejemplo, mediante una venta, podría hacerse un seguro de vida para su familia… Yo estoy en contacto con diversas compañías.

—¡Ya! —dijo Esch.

—A Dios gracias todavía soy soltero, una ventaja incalculable en los difíciles días que vivimos… pero, si alguna vez fundara un hogar, me preocuparía de proteger a mi familia con un capital o como fuera… Y usted se halla en una envidiable situación para hacerlo…

Huguenau se marchó.

En el patio le aguardaba Marguerite.

—¿Te gustaría quedarte siempre aquí?

—¿Dónde es aquí? —preguntó la niña.

—Pues aquí, con tío Esch. —La niña le miró con aire hostil. Huguenau pestañeó y se agitó—: ¿Tal vez no?

Marguerite rió también.

—O sea que no quieres…

—No, no me gusta.

—Él no te gusta nada… Debe de ser muy severo contigo, ¿no? —y acompañó sus palabras con el gesto característico de quien se dispone a propinar una azotaina.

Marguerite hizo una mueca despectiva:

—No…

—¿Y ella, tía Esch?

La niña se encogió de hombros.

Huguenau se sintió satisfecho:

—Entonces, no te quedarás aquí… Nos iremos los dos, a Bélgica… Y ahora ven, vamos a la imprenta a ver al señor Lindner.

Como buenos amigos, se acercaron hasta la imprenta y observaron cómo el señor Lindner iba colocando delante de la prensa hojas de papel.

XXVII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 4

Quedó demostrado que mi sensación de que los judíos me observaban respondía a una realidad. Hacía dos días que me hallaba un poco indispuesto, apenas había probado el desayuno y solo había salido una media hora. El segundo día por la noche, alguien llamó a la puerta de mi habitación y, con gran sorpresa por mi parte, ante mí apareció el hombre bajito a quien yo siempre había tenido por médico. En efecto se reveló como tal:

—Usted debe de estar enfermo.

—No —contesté— y, aunque lo estuviera, a nadie le importa.

—No va a costarle nada, no lo hago por dinero —dijo con timidez—. Es que hay que ayudar a los demás.

—Gracias —dije—, me encuentro perfectamente.

Estaba de pie ante mí, con el bastón apretado contra el pecho.

—¿Fiebre? —me preguntó en tono suplicante.

—No, me encuentro perfectamente bien. Ahora me disponía a salir.

Me levanté y salimos juntos de la habitación.

En el vestíbulo aguardaba uno de los judíos jóvenes; llevaba en la cara restos de maquillaje.

Entonces, el médico se presentó:

—Soy el doctor Litwak.

—Bertrand Müller, doctor en filosofía y letras.

Le tendí la mano. El joven judío también me tendió la suya. Era seca y fría, y tan lisa como su rostro.

Me siguieron como si fuera lo más natural del mundo. Desde luego, yo no tenía ninguna meta fija, pero andaba muy deprisa. Ellos dos, uno a mi derecha y otro a mi izquierda, mantenían el mismo ritmo y conversaban en yiddish. Yo me enfadé en serio:

—No comprendo ni media palabra.

Ambos se rieron:

—Dice que no comprende nada. —Y, tras un breve silencio—: ¿De verdad no entiende usted el yiddish?

—No.

Llegamos a la calle Reichenberg y tomé el camino de Rixdorf. Y entonces fue cuando encontramos a Marie.

Estaba apoyada en un farol. Había muy poca luz, porque se economizaba el gas. No obstante, la reconocí inmediatamente.

Además, las ventanas de la taberna de enfrente arrojaban un leve resplandor.

También Marie me reconoció y me sonrió.

—¿Son amigos suyos? —preguntó luego.

—Vecinos —respondí.

Propuse entrar en la taberna, pues Marie parecía agotada y con necesidad de tomar algo. Pero los otros dos se negaron a entrar. Tal vez temían verse obligados a comer cerdo, tal vez temían sufrir alguna ofensa o cosa parecida. Fuera lo que fuese, la ocasión era propicia para deshacerse de ellos.

Pero entonces sucedió algo muy curioso: Marie se puso de parte de los judíos y dijo que no tenía ni pizca de hambre y, como si no pudiera ser de ningún otro modo, comenzó a caminar junto al joven judío, mientras yo me quedaba atrás con el doctor Litwak.

—¿Quién es ese? —pregunté al médico, señalando al judío joven cuyos faldones se balanceaban ante mí.

—Se llama Nuchem Sussin —dijo el doctor Litwak.

XXVIII

El médico jefe de Estado Mayor doctor Kuhlenbeck y el doctor Kessel se hallaban operando. En general, el doctor Kessel, que no solía colaborar en el hospital y que se veía desbordado de trabajo entre su consultorio particular y el seguro de enfermedad, era relevado por el doctor Kuhlenbeck, pero ahora la ofensiva les había enviado desde el frente un nuevo cargamento de heridos y no había forma de evitarlo. Era una suerte que solo hubiera casos fáciles. Bueno, lo que ellos llamaban casos fáciles.

Y como ambos eran buenos médicos, en cuanto más tarde se sentaron en el cuarto de Kuhlenbeck, hablaron de los enfermos operados. También se les unió Flurschütz.

—Es una lástima que hoy no haya estado usted presente, Flurschütz; habría disfrutado —dijo Kuhlenbeck—. Es colosal lo que uno aprende… Si no lo hubiéramos operado, ese hombre habría andado por ahí enfermo toda la vida… —se rió— … ahora, en cambio, dentro de seis semanas, estará dispuesto a que le peguen un tiro mortal.

—Yo solo quisiera que nuestros pobres pacientes del seguro pudieran ser tan bien atendidos como los de aquí —dijo Kessel.

—¿Conocen ustedes la historia del delincuente que se tragó una espina y al que hubo que operar para poderlo colgar al día siguiente? —dijo Kuhlenbeck—. Digamos de paso que este es nuestro oficio.

—Si todos los médicos de todos los países beligerantes hiciesen huelga, la guerra se acabaría muy pronto —dijo Flurschütz.

—Muy bien, Flurschütz, empiece usted.

—A mí lo que me gustaría sería devolver la condecoración… —dijo el doctor Kessel—. ¿No le da vergüenza, Kuhlenbeck, haberle hecho semejante faena a un viejo colega?

—¿Y qué quería que hiciese? Tenía que proponerle a usted… Para los civiles, la normal es la cinta blanca y negra.

—Sí, claro, y usted se pasea por ahí con la negra y blanca de los militares… De todos modos hace ya mucho tiempo que está usted metido en esto.

—En el fondo —dijo Flurschütz—, lo que importa es que estemos aquí sentados hablando de casos más o menos interesantes sin pensar en otras cosas… No tenemos tiempo para pensar en otras cosas… y así es en todas partes. Uno es devorado por lo mismo que hace… Sencillamente devorado.

—¡Por Dios! —dijo el doctor Kessel—, tengo cincuenta y cinco años, ¿en qué otra cosa he de pensar…? Estoy muy contento de poder acostarme en mi cama todas las noches.

—¿Quieren tomar una copa? —ofreció Kuhlenbeck—. ¡Paga el regimiento…! A las dos nos enviarán veinte hombres más… ¿Se queda usted a recibirlos?

Se levantó y, acercándose al armario de las medicinas, que se hallaba junto a la ventana, sacó de él una botella de coñac y tres vasos. Tal y como estaba —de perfil, junto a la ventana y con el brazo extendido hacia el estante del armario—, su barba quedaba a contraluz y le daba un aspecto enérgico.

—La profesión en que andamos metidos acabará vaciándonos del todo por dentro —dijo Flurschütz—, y tanto el ejército como eso del patriotismo no dejan de ser profesiones semejantes a la nuestra… Decididamente, ya no hay forma de saber qué ocurre en otros ámbitos.

—Gracias a Dios —dijo Kuhlenbeck— los médicos no necesitan filosofar.

La enfermera Mathilde entró en el cuarto. Olía a recién lavada. O al menos uno creía que olía así. Su rostro ovalado, en el que destacaba su larga nariz, contrastaba con sus enrojecidas manos de criada.

—Señor director, han llamado desde la estación diciendo que el transporte ya ha llegado.

—Está bien. Bueno, otro cigarrillo antes de irnos… ¿Viene usted también, señorita enfermera?

—Las enfermeras Carla y Emmy ya están en la estación.

—Perfecto… Vámonos, pues, Flurschütz.

—Rápidos como el rayo —dijo el doctor Kessel, con cierto desánimo.

La enfermera Mathilde permanecía de pie junto a la puerta. Le encantaba estar en las habitaciones de los médicos. Y, cuando todos habían salido, Flurschütz, al pasar junto a ella, captó el reflejo de su blanco cuello y las pecas junto a la raíz del cabello, y se emocionó un poco.

—Buenas, señorita —dijo el médico jefe de Estado Mayor.

—Buenas, señorita —dijo también Flurschütz.

—Que Dios nos asista —dijo el doctor Kessel.

XXIX

Árboles y casas se alzaban ante los ojos del albañil Gödicke, el tiempo cambiaba, se hacía de día y se hacía de noche, las personas se movían de aquí para allá y él las oía hablar. La mayor parte de las veces, le traían la comida en redondos recipientes de hojalata o de loza y se la ponían delante. Todo esto ya lo sabía, pero el camino que conducía a estas cosas y por el que venían a él era un penoso camino: el albañil Gödicke tenía que trabajar ahora mucho más duramente que en toda su vida repleta de trabajo. Pues llevarse la cuchara a la boca no tenía nada en absoluto de espontáneo, habida cuenta de que no se veía claro a quién se alimentaba con este gesto; y ante la imperiosa y horrible obligación de descifrarlo, el hecho se convertía en una tortura, en una tarea desesperada, en un deber imposible de cumplir. Porque nadie, y menos aún el propio Gödicke, habría sido capaz de elaborar una teoría sobre los elementos que sostenían el edificio que constituía el alma de Gödicke. Por ejemplo, sería falso afirmar que el hombre Gödicke estaba formado por muchas clases de Gödickes: por un muchacho llamado Ludwig Gödicke que jugaba en la calle, que se masturbaba en compañía de otros muchachos y que abría túneles en los montones de basura y en las hondonadas llenas de arena; por un muchacho Gödicke al que su madre llamaba a comer, para que después le llevara la comida a su padre, albañil también, en la obra de turno. Asegurar sin más que este muchacho llegaría a formar una parte constitutiva de su Yo actual sería tan falso como, por ejemplo, pretender ver otra parte constitutiva en el joven Gödicke que, envidiando tanto a los carpinteros de Hamburgo por sus sombreros de anchas alas y sus chaquetas con botones de nácar, no descansó hasta que, para gastarles a todos ellos una mala pasada, hizo suya, entre los arbustos de la orilla del río —él, un simple peón de albañil—, a la novia del carpintero Gürzner. Y también sería falso afirmar que otra de las partes constitutivas de su Yo actual era el hombre que, durante una huelga, inutilizó una hormigonera arrancándole los tambores, hombre que, no obstante, abandonó la organización sindical solo porque, cuando se casó con la criada Anna Lamprecht, ella se pasaba el día llorando por su hijo. No, una incisión longitudinal de este tipo, una incisión así, una disección casi histórica, jamás podrá proporcionar los elementos constitutivos de una personalidad, pues no logra superar los límites de la biografía. Seguramente, las dificultades contra las que el hombre Gödicke tenía que luchar no radicaban en el hecho de que sintiera vivir en su interior a toda esta serie de personas, sino que dichas dificultades probablemente estribaban en la rotura operada en esa serie, en que la biografía se interrumpiera en determinado punto y en que no existiera conexión alguna entre aquella serie de personas y él, quien, no obstante, debía de ser el último miembro de dicha cadena; y estribaban también en que él, desligado por este proceso de algo que apenas si podía llamar su vida, hubiera perdido su propia existencia. Veía todas aquellas siluetas como a través de un cristal ahumado y, no obstante, aunque al llevarse la cuchara a la boca hubiese alimentado también y muy gustosamente —cosa que habría sido divertida— al hombre que se había acostado entre los arbustos con la novia de Gürzner, era incapaz de tender un puente hasta todo aquello: se quedaba, por así decirlo, en la otra orilla, sin que el hombre del otro lado pudiera llegar hasta él. Y sin embargo y a pesar de todo, tal vez habría tendido el puente solo con haber sabido quién era en realidad el que se acordaba de la novia de Gürzner: los ojos que en aquella ocasión veían ante sí los arbustos de la orilla no eran los mismos ojos que hoy contemplaban los árboles de la avenida, y estos tampoco eran absolutamente los mismos que ahora recorrían la habitación. Y existía, era seguro, un Gödicke que no soportaba, que condenaba incluso, que se diera de comer al hombre que seguía dispuesto a acostarse con la novia de Gürzner. Y el Gödicke condenado a sufrir aquel dolor en el bajo vientre tanto podía ser el que emitía la prohibición como el que la sufría, pero también podía ser otro del todo distinto. Eran cuestiones sumamente complicadas y el albañil Gödicke no las veía claras de ningún modo. Tal vez se habían producido porque el Gödicke que regresó a su propia conciencia no quiso reunir de nuevo los fragmentos de su alma, pero estos fragmentos tal vez fueran también los causantes de que no pudiera hacerlo. Desde luego, si le hubiera sido posible arrojar una mirada dentro de sí, sería muy probable que, en cada uno de los fragmentos admitidos de su Yo, reconociera a un Gödicke particular, algo así como si cada uno de esos fragmentos hubiera formado en torno a sí una región propia y autónoma. Porque pudiera ser que con el alma suceda lo mismo que con el protoplasma, en el cual, por incisión, es posible provocar la multiplicación de los núcleos celulares y, así, producir regiones con vida propia, intacta y autónoma. Fuera lo que fuese y sucediera lo que sucediese, en el alma de Gödicke vivían toda clase de vidas fragmentarias, intactas y autónomas todas ellas, y susceptibles todas de ser llamadas Gödicke; y era una tarea penosísima y casi insuperable reunirlas a todas bajo un mismo sombrero.

Y esta tarea tenía que llevarla a cabo el albañil Gödicke completamente solo; allí no había nadie para ayudarle.

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Cuando, tras un respetuoso plazo de tres días, Huguenau se presentó de nuevo ante Esch, halló sentada en el sillón de mimbre de junto al escritorio de Esch a una persona de anchas caderas, carente de encanto y de atractivo sexual, y de edad indefinida. Era la señora Esch, y Huguenau supo de inmediato que iba a ganar la partida. Solo necesitaba presentarse ante ella ventajosamente:

—¡Oh!, nuestra distinguida señora Esch va a ayudarnos en tan difíciles negociaciones…

La señora Esch dijo con tono algo distante:

—Yo no entiendo nada de negocios, eso es cosa de mi marido.

—Sí, claro, su distinguido esposo es sin duda todo un hombre de negocios. Es, como suele decirse, un hueso duro de roer, y más de uno se quedará sin dientes. —La señora Esch sonrió ligeramente y Huguenau se animó—: Es una gran idea aprovechar esta coyuntura para librarse del periódico, el cual, mírese como se mire, solo sirve para ponerle furioso, darle quebraderos de cabeza y disgustos y, encima, cada día va peor.

La señora Esch dijo, con tono cortés:

—Desde luego, por culpa del periódico mi marido ha de indignarse muy a menudo.

—Sin embargo, no abandono —dijo Esch.

—Pero, señor Esch, ¿acaso su salud no vale nada para usted?, además, su señora esposa también tiene que decir lo suyo… Por otra parte… —Huguenau reflexionó— … si usted no desea abandonar del todo su trabajo, puede poner condiciones relativas a su posterior colaboración. Los compradores quedarán más satisfechos si les garantizo un colaborador tan valioso.

Esch dijo que se podría hablar de ello, pero que por menos de dieciocho mil marcos no habría nada que hacer; precisamente acaba de comentarlo con su mujer.

Bueno, que el señor Esch hubiera cedido un poco respecto al fantástico precio, ya era al menos algo razonable, pero, si quería seguir participando en el negocio, no tenía más remedio que incluirse en los cálculos.

—¿Hasta qué punto? —preguntó Esch.

Huguenau se dio cuenta de que era preciso obrar con prontitud:

—Lo más sencillo, señores míos, es redactar un contrato provisional y discutir los diferentes puntos del mismo.

—Por mí no hay inconveniente —dijo Esch. Cogió una hoja de papel y añadió—: Dicte usted.

Huguenau se puso en funciones:

—Veamos. Encabezamiento: «Proyecto de contrato».

Finalmente, y después de muchos dimes y diretes, cosa que les ocupó toda la mañana, se redactó el siguiente contrato:

§ 1. El señor Wilhelm Huguenau, en calidad de apoderado y de agente fiduciario de un grupo de interesados en común acuerdo, entra a formar parte como socio de la empresa «El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris», sociedad colectiva cuyo capital se repartirá del modo siguiente:

El 10 % seguirá perteneciendo al señor August Esch.

El 60 % lo recibirá el «grupo industrial» representado por el señor Huguenau.

El 30 % lo recibirá el grupo de interesados de la localidad representado igualmente por el señor Huguenau.

La participación a partes iguales propuesta originalmente por el señor Esch fue rechazada por Huguenau:

—Eso va en contra de sus intereses, querido señor Esch; cuanto mayor sea su participación menor será su dinero en efectivo… Ya ve usted que no pierdo de vista sus intereses.

§ 2. El capital de la empresa lo constituyen los derechos de edición del periódico y demás derechos, así como todas las instalaciones de oficina y de imprenta. Se emitirán acciones con carácter provisional sobre el nuevo reparto del capital.

La estatua de la Libertad y la vista de Badenweiler fueron reclamadas por el señor Esch a título de propiedad privada y separadas del capital de la empresa. «¡Cómo no!», dijo Huguenau generosamente.

§ 3. Los beneficios netos serán repartidos entre los socios de acuerdo con sus acciones, mientras no se destinen a fondos de reserva. Las pérdidas se sostendrán en la misma proporción.

La especificación acerca de las pérdidas constó en el contrato por exigencia del señor Esch, pues a Huguenau ni se le había ocurrido la posibilidad de que las hubiera. Lo de los fondos de reserva también fue idea de Esch.

§ 4. El señor Huguenau, en calidad de representante y de apoderado del nuevo grupo de asociados, aporta a la empresa la cantidad de 20.000 marcos (veinte mil). Un tercio del capital deberá invertirse de inmediato; el tercio restante, a petición de los socios imponentes, podrá vencer al semestre o, a lo sumo, al año. Por pagos diferidos se otorga a la empresa un interés del 4 % semestral. Las acciones serán libradas conforme se realicen los ingresos.

Como las acciones debían librarse inmediatamente después de los ingresos y como el elevado interés del cuatro por ciento ofrecía ya impedimento más que sobrado, Huguenau no temía demasiado que las personalidades de la localidad interesadas en el asunto hicieran uso del derecho de pago aplazado. Y si, a pesar de ello, lo hicieran, siempre habría forma de solventar la cuestión. Tampoco preocupaba mucho a Huguenau cómo se las arreglaría él para aportar la cuota del imaginario grupo industrial: la cuota más próxima no vencía hasta pasados seis meses, o sea hasta el año nuevo, es decir, a comienzos de 1919, y hasta entonces faltaba mucho tiempo y podían pasar muchas cosas. Cuando se está en guerra, las situaciones cambian y alteran el orden de las cosas; tal vez llegara la paz, tal vez el periódico mismo financiara esas cantidades con las ganancias e incluso pudiera suceder que fuera preciso ocultar y hacer desaparecer, mediante pérdidas ficticias, dichas ganancias, tal vez para entonces Esch hubiera muerto… Siempre se encuentra la forma de velar por los propios intereses y seguir adelante.

§ 5. La aportación del señor Wilhelm Huguenau, que suma en total 20.000 marcos, se distribuirá en dos cuentas: 13.400 marcos a la cuenta «Huguenau-grupo industrial» y 6.600 marcos a la cuenta «grupo local».

Pero llegaron al punto más difícil de la negociación. Esch se mantenía firme en sus dieciocho mil marcos, mientras Huguenau sostenía que de este precio había que deducir, ante todo, el diez por ciento correspondiente a la parte que le quedaba a Esch y, además, dos mil marcos por su participación en la ampliación de capital, o sea cuatro mil marcos en total, de modo que, si Esch aceptaba su propia valoración, solo debería recibir catorce mil marcos, cosa que, por otra parte, ya era mucho, demasiado incluso, puesto que todo intermediario ha de ser objetivo y él —Huguenau— jamás podría aceptar para su grupo semejante precio, por mucho que deseara favorecer a Esch y a su encantadora esposa. No, era sencillamente imposible, pues él debía presentarse ante sus clientes con un contrato serio y no le apetecía ser objeto de burlas; él no era parte interesada en la cuestión, sino que la consideraba de forma objetiva y, como juez objetivo, solo podía proponer diez mil marcos por el noventa por ciento objeto de la venta y ni un pfennig más.

—No —gritó Esch, que quería dieciocho mil.

—¿Cómo puede un hombre ser tan sordo? —dijo Huguenau dirigiéndose a la señora Esch—. Acabo de demostrarle con números que, incluso partiendo de su propia valoración, solo puede pedir catorce mil.

La señora Esch suspiró.

Finalmente, llegaron a un acuerdo de doce mil marcos más un contrato de empleo.

§ 6. El señor August Esch, como único propietario hasta el presente, recibirá:

a) una indemnización de 12.000 marcos, un tercio de los cuales, o sea. 4.000 marcos, le serán abonados por la empresa en el acto, y otros dos plazos de 4.000 los días 1 de enero y 1 de julio de 1919. Los dos pagos aplazados devengarán un interés anual del 4 %.

b) un contrato de empleo por dos años como redactor jefe y como jefe contable, con un sueldo mensual de 125 marcos.

Quizá Esch no hubiera cedido nunca, ni tan siquiera cuando Huguenau, desviando con habilidad la discusión hacia el tema de los intereses, se dejó arrancar tras una lucha durísima en apariencia el cuatro por ciento; a buen seguro que no hubiera cedido nunca, si no se hubiera deslumbrado ante las complejas contabilidades que veía en perspectiva. Y tan fascinado quedó por ellas que ni se le ocurrió pensar que las cuotas aplazadas —desde luego, ignoraba que el primer pago dependía de un milagro— pudieran quedarse tal vez sin saldar o que la diferencia entre los doce mil marcos y los veinte mil marcos pudiera ir a parar al fraudulento y siempre abierto bolsillo de Huguenau, y esto pese a todos los sugestivos proyectos de contabilidad. De todos modos, tampoco Huguenau pensaba en algo tan feo, como tampoco era consciente de que, mediante el pago del grupo de la localidad interesado en el asunto, *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* le era regalado. Huguenau, que luchaba con toda honestidad por los intereses de sus hipotéticos clientes, dijo al fin agotado:

—¡Uf!, por mí, que sean doce mil y el cuatro por ciento como usted desea, a ver si así terminamos. Ya me haré yo responsable de ello… Pero ahora me toca a mí recibir algo a cambio…

§ 7. Derechos y obligaciones recíprocas.

a) El señor Huguenau ejercerá la función de editor. La dirección comercial y financiera de la empresa será de su exclusiva atribución. Y tendrá, además, derecho a rechazar o aceptar, según su criterio, artículos para el periódico. Por esta actividad, la empresa le garantiza un sueldo mínimo de 175 marcos al mes, es decir, un sueldo de 2.100 marcos al año.

b) El señor Esch, mientras su contrato de trabajo esté en vigencia, tendrá el derecho y el deber de ocuparse de la contabilidad de la empresa y actuará como subdirector.

En consideración al grupo industrial, Esch tuvo que aceptar la limitación de sus funciones como redactor jefe; los derechos de que disfrutaría como contable constituían una especie de compensación.

§ 8. Las dependencias utilizadas hasta el presente por el periódico, enclavadas en la finca propiedad del señor Esch, seguirán perteneciendo a la empresa durante tres años más.

El señor Esch también pondrá a disposición del editor, y por el mismo período de tiempo, dos habitaciones bien amuebladas, con derecho a desayuno, en la sección frontal del edificio arriba mencionado. El señor Esch recibirá de la empresa por dicho concepto la remuneración de 25 marcos al mes.

§ 9. Caso de una ulterior transformación de la sociedad colectiva en una S. L. o en una S. A., deberán tenerse en cuenta las disposiciones que figuran más arriba.

Ante el proyecto de transformación en una sociedad obligada a rendir cuentas públicamente, el castillo de naipes se derrumbaría como es natural, pero Huguenau no se inquietó lo más mínimo. Para él, todo aquello era un negocio legal y solo el hecho de que le brindara alojamiento y desayuno gratis le parecía una pillería, pillería que le llenaba de satisfacción. A Esch le parecía un fallo que no hubieran conseguido diez cláusulas. Reflexionaron un poco y al fin dieron con:

§ 10. Las eventuales querellas que pudiera suscitar este contrato serán presentadas ante el tribunal público.

Y así fue como Huguenau pudo comunicar en un plazo asombrosamente breve —era el 14 de mayo— que la transacción se había llevado a cabo sin la menor dificultad. Las personalidades del lugar no dudaron en aportar su capital global de seis mil seiscientos marcos; de ellos y de acuerdo con el contrato se entregaron cuatro mil al señor Esch; el señor Huguenau, comerciante sólido y precavido, destinó mil seiscientos marcos a cubrir los gastos de producción, y los mil marcos restantes a título de fondos disponibles los empleó en sí mismo. Se extendieron las acciones provisionales a favor de los suscriptores y, al cabo de unos días, se comunicó ya en la forma adecuada que, a partir del 1 de junio, el periódico aparecería con una nueva dirección y una nueva estructuración. Huguenau logró que el mayor se animara a inaugurar la nueva era escribiendo un editorial; asimismo una serie de artículos, en parte patrióticos, en parte nacional-económicos, en su mayoría sin embargo patriótico-económicos, surgidos de las plumas de las personalidades que participaban en el periódico, honrarían el primer número.

No obstante, Huguenau prefirió celebrar la nueva época instalándose en las dos habitaciones que le fueron asignadas en casa de Esch.

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Degradación de los valores 4

Desde luego el artista no es el único en ser arrastrado por el arte de su época, desde luego el estilo influye en los actos todos de los coetáneos, desde luego el estilo no solo fructifica en la obra de arte sino también en todos los valores que constituyen la cultura de una época y de los que la obra de arte es únicamente una parte ínfima; a pesar de ello, uno se queda perplejo al preguntarse hasta qué punto el estilo toma cuerpo en el hombre medio, por ejemplo en un viajante del tipo Wilhelm Huguenau. ¿El comerciante en textiles o en mangueras tiene algo en común con una voluntad de estilo como la que se observa en los edificios de los grandes almacenes Messel o en las grandes salas de turbinas de Peter Behren? Su gusto personal se inclinaría de seguro por hotelitos alineados llenos de infinitas baratijas y, aunque no fuera así, no por ello dejaría de formar parte del público, el cual, se mire como se mire, está separado del artista por un abismo.

Pero si se observa más de cerca a un hombre del tipo Huguenau, vemos que esto no depende del abismo existente entre él y el artista. Cabe suponer que, en las épocas con voluntad de estilo muy manifiesta, la incomprensión entre el artista y sus contemporáneos era menos brutal y que, por tanto, un nuevo cuadro de Durero en la iglesia de San Sebaldo despertaba en los Huguenaus del momento admiración y satisfacción, pues hay muchos indicios de que, en aquella época, los artistas y sus coetáneos vivían en el seno de una vida comunitaria del todo distinta a la de hoy, y de que la comprensión del pintor para con un cortador de patrones o un guarnicionero era al menos tan profunda como el gozo que estos experimentaban al contemplar los cuadros del pintor. Naturalmente, son cosas que no pueden probarse y es muy posible también que muchas ideas renovadoras hallaran escaso eco entre sus coetáneos; tal vez algo así le sucedió a Grünewald. Pero los casos como este no son esenciales y si en la Edad Media reinó o no la comprensión entre el artista y sus contemporáneos es algo que carece de importancia ante el hecho de que tanto la comprensión como la incomprensión son igualmente expresión del legendario «espíritu de la época», como lo son la obra de arte o cualquier otro tipo de actividad coetánea.

Pero si esto es así, también resulta indiferente hacia dónde se inclinarían el gusto arquitectónico y los demás gustos de un viajante del tipo de Huguenau, como tampoco resulta significativo que Huguenau sintiera determinado placer estético por las máquinas. Lo único importante es saber si sus restantes actividades y sus demás pensamientos obedecían a los mismos principios que, en otros órdenes de la vida, habían producido un estilo sin ornamentación o descubierto la teoría de la relatividad o llevado al pensamiento por la avanzada del neokantismo; en otras palabras, saber si el pensamiento de una época lleva en sí el estilo y si está supeditado al estilo que se manifiesta de modo aprehensible en la obra de arte; o sea, si la verdad, como realización del pensamiento, sostiene o no al estilo de la época en que ha sido hallada, época en la que tiene la misma validez que los demás valores de la misma.

Y no puede ser de otro modo, ya que, aunque la verdad solo es, desde un determinado punto de vista, un valor más entre todos los demás valores, también la actividad del ser humano está supeditada a la verdad, está, por así decirlo, impregnada de verdad: todo lo que el hombre hace es para él plausible a cada instante, lo hace motivado por razones que para él son verdad, lo supedita a una cadena de pruebas; el hombre —al menos en el momento en que suceden las cosas— siempre ha actuado de forma correcta. O sea, que si su actuación está supeditada al estilo también su pensamiento ha de estarlo; si, en este proceso (en el terreno práctico o en el teórico del conocimiento), el acto ha precedido al pensamiento o el pensamiento al acto, o si la primacía de la vida ha precedido a la primacía de la razón, o el *sum* al *cogito* o el *cogito* al *sum*, es una cuestión que no precisa ser dilucidada, únicamente permanece aprehensible la lógica racional del pensamiento, en tanto que la lógica irracional del acto, la que forma todos los estilos, solo es reconocible en la obra creada, solo es reconocible en el resultado.

Y también en función de tan íntima unión entre el ente del pensamiento lógico y los valores y los no-valores producidos por el acto, habrá que ordenar el esquema mental que domina a un Huguenau y lo obliga a actuar de una forma determinada, que le prescribe sus decisiones comerciales y que le hace concebir los contratos de este modo y no de otro; toda la lógica interior de un Huguenau tendrá que ordenarse dentro de la lógica global de una época y ser regulada dentro de una relación esencial conforme con esta lógica, la lógica de que están penetrándose el espíritu productivo de la época y su estilo visible. Y aunque este pensamiento racional, aunque esta lógica racional constituyan simplemente un fino filamento, en cierto modo unidimensional y tendido en torno a la pluridimensionalidad de la vida, el pensamiento, oscilante dentro de la abstracción del espacio lógico, es, sin embargo, la simplificación de la pluridimensionalidad de lo sucedente y de su estilo global, es la simplificación del resultado visible del estilo, el resumen de todas las obras portadoras de estilo.

Huguenau es un hombre que actúa metódicamente. Ha dividido metódicamente su jornada, lleva metódicamente sus negocios, metódicamente concibe sus contratos y metódicamente los cierra. Detrás de todo esto existe una lógica que está por completo desprovista de ornamentación, y que este tipo de lógica exija una carencia de ornamentación en todos los sentidos no parece ser una conclusión atrevida; incluso parece tan justa y buena como el que todo lo necesario es también bueno y justo. Y, no obstante, esta ausencia de ornamentación va unida a la nada, va unida a la muerte; tras ella se oculta el monstruo de un fenecer en el que se ha derrumbado el tiempo.

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No se puede confundir a un rebelde con un criminal, aunque la sociedad tache con frecuencia de criminal al rebelde, aunque a veces el criminal, para ennoblecer sus actos, se manifieste como un rebelde. El rebelde actúa solo: es el hijo más fiel de la comunidad, que, a su vez, es para él la meta de su oposición y de su rebeldía; el mundo que combate representa para él una plenitud de relaciones vivas cuyos hilos han sido simplemente sumergidos en la confusión por la maldad demoníaca; y su misión consiste en esclarecerlos y ordenarlos de acuerdo con un plan mejor. Así protestaba Lutero contra el Papa y así podía calificarse en justicia a Esch de rebelde.

Pero ello no constituye en absoluto motivo suficiente para tachar a Huguenau de criminal. Con ello no solo se le injuriaría sino que, además, se cometería con él una gran injusticia. Naturalmente, desde el punto de vista militar, un desertor es un criminal y, con toda seguridad, hay soldados convencidos que desprecian al desertor con la misma intensidad con que, por ejemplo, un campesino desprecia a un ladrón de gallinas. E, igual que al campesino, la muerte les parece el castigo más justo para su delito. No obstante existe una diferencia objetiva y de principio: lo esencial del crimen radica en su reincidencia; con la reincidencia se asemeja a una profesión burguesa. El crimen solo va contra la sociedad de una forma muy vaga, incluso cuando su lucha contra la burguesía adopta formas americanas. Si se implantara el comunismo, el ladrón y el falsificador de letras de cambio no sabrían qué hacer; y el desvalijador de cajas fuertes que, al amparo de la noche, acude a su trabajo provisto de silenciosas suelas de goma es un artesano como cualquier otro, y conservador como todos los artesanos; incluso la profesión del asesino

que, con el cuchillo entre los dientes, escala un incómodo muro no constituye una amenaza para la comunidad en general, sino que se reduce a algo personal que el asesino debe solventar con su víctima. Nada va en contra de lo establecido. Las proposiciones de mejora o de paliación de las leyes penales jamás han sido elaboradas por los delincuentes, pese a ser algo que les atañe a ellos como a nadie. Si dependiera de los delincuentes, se seguiría ahorcando a los ladrones y a los falsificadores de moneda, y ni siquiera se establecería diferencia entre el asesinato común y el perpetrado a golpes, aunque, por lo demás, los delincuentes poseen un sentido muy refinado del ejercicio de sus profesiones y gustan de una legislación que se adapte a sus matices y a sus exigencias. Pero precisamente porque para ellos constituye una necesidad el reconocimiento de que determinados actos merezcan la horca, otros la rueda o las tenazas ardientes, otros los azotes o la cárcel, precisamente por estos torpes deseos —que en el fondo no son sino un balbuceo propio de seres incultos que no saben expresarse correctamente y que piden con dificultad, en símbolos, por así decirlo, algo que solo es una pequeña parte de lo que alberga su corazón y que apenas resulta inteligible—, precisamente por ello, se ve con claridad cuál es la meta de sus deseos: que el país en que habitan, ese país situado en la frontera de un mundo lleno de orden perfecto, sea integrado en ese orden amplio, perfecto y casi amado que no precisa de cambios; y si los delincuentes únicamente son capaces de imaginar dicha integración y dicha anexión mediante un sistema de castigos severos y perfectamente ordenados, de ahí se deduce que su naturaleza es social y soñadora, que está siempre llena de anhelo de evitar luchas fronterizas, del anhelo de dedicarse a su profesión en paz y de adaptarse, con mayor conformidad, discreción y sutileza cada vez, a un servicio que es útil al orden global y a lo establecido.

Ambos, el criminal y el rebelde, confrontan con lo establecido su orden y su concepto de los valores, pero, en tanto que el rebelde pretende sojuzgar lo establecido, el criminal intenta en cambio adaptarse a ello. El desertor no pertenece al ámbito del uno ni del otro (a no ser que pertenezca a los dos). Así pudiera sentirlo Huguenau ahora que se enfrenta con la tarea de construir, en los límites de un orden más amplio, su propio pequeño mundo y su realidad, y adaptarse a aquel; y aunque afirme que los desertores merecen ser fusilados, no tiene mayor importancia ni resulta absurdo; como menos absurdo que el lenguaje de sus sueños resulta el hecho de que *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* se le aparezca como parte de una enorme máquina, como una estructura de latón cuyas varillas se unen y enlazan entre sí, como un lugar del país de su ley personal, país situado junto a aquel cuyas leyes respeta y ama y en cuyo seno desea penetrar y vivir. Y esta fue la serie toda de los motivos que hicieron tan necesario para Huguenau conquistar *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, motivos que explican también que su acción tuviera tan feliz éxito.

XXXIII

Artículo de fondo de El Mensajero del Electorado
de Tréveris *del día 1 de junio de 1918*

EL DESTINO DEL PUEBLO ALEMÁN CAMBIA

Observaciones del comandante de la plaza, mayor Joachim von Pasenow.

Entonces le dejó el diablo, y he aquí que los ángeles llegaron, y le servían.

Mateo IV, 11

Aunque el cambio acontecido en la dirección de este periódico es solamente un nimio suceso frente a aquel tan decisivo cuyo cuarto aniversario podremos celebrar muy pronto, a mí me parece que, como suele hacerse con frecuencia, deberíamos también considerar este pequeño acontecimiento como reflejo de aquel otro más importante. Pues si también nosotros, en nuestro periódico, nos hallamos en un momento de cambio y si también nosotros tenemos la intención de emprender un nuevo y mejor camino que nos conduzca más cerca de la verdad, también nosotros debemos tener la seguridad de que, en la medida de las fuerzas humanas…

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……

¿dónde está el diablo que hay que arrojar del mundo?, ¿dónde están los ángeles que queremos llamar en nuestra ayuda? Un viejo soldado tiene que expresar su opinión sin ambages, aún a riesgo de que a veces suene como un idioma anticuado…

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… liberar de la opresión de los pueblos enemigos, liberar la patria, y con ella al mundo entero, del espíritu dañino, el cual a la tierra…

.....

.....

… no extrañarse de que los pueblos sean castigados con discordias multiplicadas por cien y desmembramientos multiplicados por mil. Pues deberás ser castigado en el mismo miembro con el que has pecado.

Oigo a los que objetan que deberíamos sencillamente aceptar el castigo, soportar el látigo, presentar la otra mejilla al torturador…

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… al igual que la lucha de Lutero contra el corrompido papado fue una lucha justa. ¿Acaso no nos enseña Clausewitz, nuestro maestro, que es propio de las armas de la guerra el espíritu de la justicia, el cual…?

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… de nuestra lucha deberá decirse: «Sus enemigos huyeron por miedo de él, todos los malvados se consternaron y la salvación está en sus manos» (Macabeos III, 6); por ello no depende de la persecución del enemigo que huye sino de la salvación, salvación tanto del propio pueblo como del extraño. Seríamos miopes, y en verdad todas las víctimas habrían sido inútiles, si con frivolidad respecto a todo esto y a Dios…

.....

.....

… posee aquella libertad externa que debemos alcanzar solo si le es otorgada al mismo tiempo la libertad interior, más elevada y auténticamente divina. Y esta no la alcanzaremos en los campos de batalla, por muy victoriosos que quedemos, sino que hemos de encontrarla en nuestros corazones. Porque la libertad interior posee los mismos derechos que la fe que el mundo se dispone a perder. Por ello esta guerra no es solo…

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… según la Escritura? «Las obras buenas y piadosas jamás convierten a un hombre en piadoso y bueno, sino que es el hombre bueno y piadoso quien hace obras piadosas y buenas», dice Lutero a propósito de la libertad del hombre cristiano, y añade todavía: «Y puesto que las obras no convierten a nadie en piadoso y el ser humano tiene que ser piadoso antes de realizar sus obras, es evidente que únicamente la fe por la pura gracia a través de Cristo…

.....

.....

… y Juan (III, 30) dijo: «Él debe crecer, yo, en cambio, debo disminuir», y así fue la guerra: la guerra tenía que crecer ya que la fe disminuía, y, antes de que la fe renazca de nuevo y se extienda, no podrá terminar esta guerra. El mal por el mal…

.....

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… y casi nos anima a desear que las negras cohortes se extiendan por todo el mundo enseguida, a fin de que, del fuego del Apocalipsis, puedan surgir la nueva hermandad y la confraternidad, para que con ello se reedifique el reino de Cristo y tendamos a un nuevo y maravilloso…

.....

.....

… tropas negras provistas de armas impropias de caballeros se yerguen contra nosotros, pero solo son una avanzadilla. A esta le sigue el ejército negro, le sigue el horror del Apocalipsis de Juan. Porque mientras la raza blanca no supere la debilidad de sentimientos y por sí misma…

… roba el honor, es una raza perdida y en torno a ella se cernirá la más horrible oscuridad y nadie acudirá en su ayuda, y de sus…

……

……

… el veneno de quienes reniegan de Dios y el de los aventureros, que no solo ha infectado las orgullosas metrópolis de los enemigos, sino que tampoco ha respetado nuestra patria. Como una red inextricable se extiende invisible sobre nuestras ciudades…

……

……

… y así como entonces hubo de surgir la gloriosa campaña del Setenta para unir los desmembrados pueblos alemanes, así también la fama de esta guerra, mucho más grande y mucho más espantosa, deberá unir no solo fraternalmente los pueblos sino que, en la misma medida…

……

……

… también la fe y la gracia de la libertad volverán a pertenecernos. Entonces podrá decirse: «Un cristiano es un servidor de todas las cosas que está sujeto a todos los hombres», y también «un cristiano es un amo que manda, con entera libertad, sobre todas las cosas y que no está sujeto a nadie», y ambas afirmaciones serán válidas, porque entre ambas hemos de imaginar la verdadera libertad.

No sé si me habré expresado con claridad, pues yo mismo he tenido que luchar largo tiempo para llegar a estas conclusiones, y estoy convencido de que son incompletas. Pero también aquí es válido lo que dice el general Clausewitz: «La visión desgarradora de los peligros y de los sufrimientos hace que, con frecuencia, nos dejemos arrastrar con mayor facilidad por el sentimiento que por las convicciones racionales y, en la semioscuridad de todo fenómeno, es tan difícil ver con claridad y profundidad, que la confusión entre sentimientos y convicciones es más que comprensible y disculpable. Siempre actuamos conforme a *un presentimiento y una premonición de la verdad*».

Así se debatía el mayor Von Pasenow ante el problema de la guerra y el futuro del pueblo alemán, lo cual se le hacía muy duro. La guerra, para cuyo ejercicio había sido educado; la guerra, por la que había vestido de uniforme casi toda su vida y por la que había vuelto a vestirlo hacía cuatro años; la guerra había dejado repentinamente de ser una cuestión de uniforme, ya no era una cuestión de pantalones azules o rojos, una cuestión de camaradas enemigos que entrecruzaban caballerosamente sus armas; la guerra se había convertido en algo que no era coronación ni plenitud de una vida de uniforme, sino en algo que, imperceptible pero más sensiblemente cada vez, había sacudido los cimientos de esta vida, desgastando su cohesión moral, y, a través de las mallas de la urdimbre, dejaba ver la sonrisa sardónica del pecado. Para convertirse —sometiéndolo— en dueño y señor del pecado, ya no bastaban las fuerzas espirituales aprendidas en la academia de cadetes de Culm, lo cual no tenía nada de extraño ya que, ni tan siquiera la Iglesia, pese a sus mejores armas, sabe cómo dominar íntegramente la antinomia del pecado. Pero lo que Agustín presintiera como curación de este mundo terrenal, lo que antes que él habían soñado ya los estoicos —la idea de la Ciudad de Dios, que acoge en su seno cuanto lleve la faz de hombre—, era una idea sublime que resplandecía a través de la visión de los peligros y de los sufrimientos que desgarran el corazón, y era una idea que —más sentimiento que convicción racional— había hecho mella en el espíritu del viejo oficial. Y así fue como las meditaciones del mayor Von Pasenow fueron situándose en una línea que, aunque confusa y zigzagueante, pero siempre continua, procedía de Zenón y de Séneca, y tal vez incluso de los pitagóricos.

XXXIV

Degradación de los valores 5

DIGRESIÓN LÓGICA

Admitiendo que en la academia imperial prusiana de cadetes de Culm dominase un estilo de pensamiento muy otro que, por ejemplo, el de un seminario de sacerdotes católico-romano, la idea de «estilo de pensamiento» nos hará recordar en demasía la vaguedad de aquellas tendencias filosóficas e históricas cuya clave metodológica radica en la palabra «intuición». Porque el apriorismo inequívoco del pensamiento y del logos no autoriza el menor matiz de estilo, no precisa de ninguna otra intuición fuera de la propia percepción apriorística del espíritu, y relega todo lo demás al ámbito de las digresiones empíricas, de las digresiones patológicas, que son competencia no de la investigación filosófica, sino de la psicológica o de la médica. Insuficiencia del pensamiento empírico y terrenal de los cerebros humanos frente a la lógica absoluta del Yo, frente a la lógica absoluta de Dios.

O también podría objetarse lo que sigue: la lógica absoluta y formal subsistirá siempre, es inalterable incluso para los cerebros humanos; dado que las variaciones solo conciernen a los contenidos del pensamiento, a las penetraciones cognoscitivas de la esencia del mundo, en el mejor de los casos es una cuestión que pertenecerá a la teoría del conocimiento y nunca jamás a la lógica. La lógica permanece «sin estilo», como las matemáticas.

¿La forma lógica no tiene realmente nada que ver con los contenidos? De un modo u otro, la forma misma es, efectiva y sorprendentemente, contenido. Esto se ve a la perfección cuando se remonta la llamada cadena formal de pruebas, ya que no se trata tan solo de que los eslabones de dicha cadena sean axiomas o sentencias axiomáticas —por ejemplo, el principio de contradicción— o sean afirmaciones que formen una barrera de plausibilidad insalvable (hasta que un día es superada como, *verbi gratia*, el principio del tercio excluido), y cuya evidencia pueda ser simplemente comprendida por su contenido, aunque no pueda ser demostrada formalmente; sino que, por encima de todo ello, se trata de la absoluta imposibilidad de determinar una cadena lógica de tales características, pues, si en último término no existieran unos principios ultralógicos, unos principios metafísicos y de contenido tales que, pese a todas las trabas de las delimitaciones formales, conservaran en sus aplicaciones la marcha de todo el mecanismo, si no existieran dichos principios, toda la maquinaria lógica de la deducción y de la demostración se detendría inmediatamente. El edificio de la lógica formal descansa sobre los cimientos del contenido.

El idealismo psicológico-intuitivo ha predeterminado un «sentimiento de la verdad» cuya evidencia hace que todas las cadenas de preguntas, empezando por el asombroso «¿qué es esto?» y continuando por el siempre repetido «por qué», desemboquen finalmente en un conformismo, en una última plausibilidad axiomática: «Esto es así y no de otro modo». Así pues, si el sentimiento de la verdad es, teniendo en cuenta la invariabilidad de un logos apriorístico y puramente formal, una mera introducción superficial a la verdad, habrá que concederle, en razón de los elementos llenos de contenido que hay en lo lógico, una nueva y más justa consideración. Pues las posiciones de evidencia situadas al final de la serie de preguntas y de demostraciones se han desligado de la invariabilidad formal y, a pesar de ello, he aquí que han de ejercer una influencia determinante sobre el curso de la mostración lógica y sobre su forma. De ello surge un problema: ¿De qué modo los contenidos, sean de naturaleza lógico-axiomática o ajenos a toda lógica, pueden obrar sobre la lógica formal para que, sin que nada cambie en la invariabilidad formal, pueda aparecer una mutabilidad de estilo? Pero este ya no es un problema psicológico ni empírico, sino metodológico y metafísico, ya que tras él se halla, con absoluto apriorismo, la cuestión primera de no importa qué ética: ¿Cómo puede Dios permitir el error, cómo es posible que el loco tenga derecho a vivir en este mundo de Dios?

Puede pensarse que jamás una serie de preguntas conduce a una conclusión; todas las series de preguntas ontológicas poseen evidentemente esta característica: el problema de la materia, que va de un concepto fundamental a otro, de la sustancia originaria al átomo, del átomo al electrón, del electrón al quantum de energía, y que desemboca una vez y otra y siempre en un punto muerto provisional, constituye un buen ejemplo de esta infinita serie de preguntas.

Determinar en qué punto se interrumpe esta serie de preguntas es cosa que atañe al sentimiento de la verdad y de la evidencia, es algo que depende del axiomatismo y de su fuerza. Si, según la doctrina de Thales de Mileto, para la serie ontológica de cuestiones había que situar en la sustancia «agua» este punto de plausibilidad, ello indica que, para Thales, existía un sistema de axiomas dentro del cual la cualidad

agua de la materia aparecía como «demostrable». En este caso, los que detienen la cadena de cuestiones son axiomas de contenido y no axiomas lógico-formales, son axiomas de la cosmogonía en vigencia; pero estos axiomas de contenido han de tener con los axiomas lógico-formales alguna relación, por lo menos una relación de no contradicción, pues, si el curso progresivo de la demostración no concordara con el curso progresivo formal, la plausibilidad no existiría. (Que, a pesar de ello, los axiomas de contenido y los axiomas lógicos pueden llegar a ser antagónicos es cosa que se ve con claridad en la doctrina de la doble verdad.) Pero incluso partiendo, con absoluto escepticismo, del punto de vista del «no sabemos nada»; negando la existencia de una plausibilidad cosmogónica y su axiomatismo, y considerando que la cadena de preguntas no solo no puede romperse sino que su ruptura es una pura arbitrariedad racional, aunque ficticia, incluso así es evidente que también el «no sabemos nada» posee como tal un determinado carácter de plausibilidad y que este se apoya en una lógica determinada y en un axiomatismo lógico determinado.

Sobrepasando el marco de lo puramente intuitivo, la enorme cantidad de axiomas operantes contenidos en una imagen del mundo podría dar una cierta idea racional de esta situación. Naturalmente, esa cantidad de axiomas no puede ni demostrarse ni contarse; tan solo, en los casos extremos, puede destacarse la riqueza o la pobreza de axiomas. Por ejemplo, la cosmogonía de los primitivos es de una complejidad manifiesta: todas las cosas del mundo siguen su propia vida, son, en cierto modo, *causa sui*: cada árbol es habitado por su propio dios, cada cosa por su propio demonio; es un mundo de muchos, de infinitos axiomas, y cada serie de preguntas relacionadas con las cosas del mundo choca, a los pocos pasos, tal vez incluso al primero, contra uno de esos axiomas. Estas series ontológicas, cortas, casi de un solo miembro, se adentran, pese a su multiplicidad, por un mundo monoteísta; y aunque no se adentraran hasta el infinito, avanzan lo suficiente como para converger en la causa originaria única, o sea, «Dios». Así pues, si se consideran únicamente los axiomas cosmogónico-ontológicos —dejando a un lado los otros, como por ejemplo los puramente lógicos—, en ambos casos extremos, representados por las cosmogonías polares de la magia primitiva y del monoteísmo, el número de axiomas se reduce del infinito a uno solo.

En la medida en que el lenguaje es expresión de la lógica, en la medida en que la lógica aparece como inmanente en la estructura del lenguaje, puede sacarse del lenguaje una conclusión relativa al número de axiomas ontológicos, relativa a la naturaleza de la lógica y de la variabilidad de su «estilo». Porque precisamente el complicado sistema ontológico de los primitivos, precisamente su amplio sistema de axiomas se refleja en la estructura y en la sintaxis de su lenguaje, complejas en grado sumo. Y del mismo modo que no es posible atribuir a razones prácticas la variación de la imagen metafísica del mundo —nadie podrá afirmar que la metafísica occidental sea más práctica que, por ejemplo, la china, que se encuentra por lo menos en el mismo nivel de desarrollo—, tampoco es posible subordinar exclusivamente a pensamientos de índole práctica la simplificación y el cambio de estilo básico de las lenguas (aunque no se pueda poner en duda su desgaste por el uso), y ello sin contar con que la explicación de una finalidad práctica no es suficiente para aclarar toda una serie de cambios y de peculiaridades sintácticas.

De todos modos, mediante una imagen es posible representar las funciones que pueda desempeñar un sistema de axiomas, ya sea ontológico, ya sea lógico, en la estructura propiamente lógica, y cómo dicho sistema de axiomas puede imprimir un «estilo» a esa inmutabilidad formal: en determinadas construcciones geométricas, el lejano punto del infinito se supone, arbitrariamente, incluido en la superficie finita del dibujo y, entonces, se procede a la construcción de la figura como si el punto ficticio del infinito fuera en realidad el infinitamente lejano. En trazados de este tipo, la situación recíproca de los distintos elementos de la construcción sigue siendo la misma, como si realmente el punto se hallara infinitamente lejos; solo que todas las medidas se han desfigurado y aproximado. De modo semejante pueden imaginarse las mutaciones que sufren las construcciones lógicas cuando el punto lógico de plausibilidad se desplaza desde el infinito hasta lo finito y lo terrenal: la lógica formal subsiste como tal, incluso subsisten las aproximaciones asociativas que afectan al contenido. Lo que cambia son sus «proporciones», es su «estilo».

El paso que faltaba dar más allá de la cosmogonía monoteísta era casi imperceptible y, sin embargo, mucho más importante que todos los anteriores: la causa primera fue transportada desde el infinito «finito» de un Dios, en cualquier caso todavía antropomórfico, hasta el verdadero infinito abstracto. Las series de preguntas ya no desembocan en la idea de un Dios, sino que fluyen realmente hacia el infinito (ya no tienden, por así decirlo, hacia un punto, sino que se han paralelizado); la cosmogonía ya no se

apoya en Dios, sino en la eterna posibilidad de seguir preguntando, en la convicción interior de que en ninguna parte existe un punto de reposo, de que siempre se puede seguir preguntando, de que se debe preguntar, de que no es posible revelar ni la materia original ni la causa primera, de que tras la lógica se oculta una metalógica, de que cualquier solución sirve únicamente de solución intermedia y de que solo queda el acto en sí de preguntar. La cosmogonía se ha convertido en algo radicalmente científico, y su lenguaje y su sintaxis han borrado su «estilo», se han convertido en expresión matemática.

XXXV

El martes 4 de junio, Esch y Huguenau paseaban por la plaza del Mercado. El tiempo era lluvioso. Huguenau, corpulento y rollizo, caminaba muy ufano con la gabardina abierta. Como un vencedor, pensó Esch venenosamente.

Al doblar la esquina del ayuntamiento se encontraron frente a un triste cortejo: maniatado, escoltado por dos hombres con fusil y bayoneta calada, un soldado alemán era conducido a la cárcel. Tal vez venían de la estación o del palacio de justicia. Llovía y las gotas de lluvia resbalaban por el rostro del hombre; para secárselas tenía que llevarse de vez en cuando las maniatadas manos a la cara con un gesto que resultaba a la vez torpe y conmovedor.

—¿Qué habrá hecho ese? —preguntó Esch al también un tanto conmovido Huguenau.

Huguenau se encogió de hombros y murmuró algo sobre asesinato o robo o violación de niños:

—Tal vez ha matado a un cura… Lo habrá apuñalado con un cuchillo de cocina.

—Apuñalado con un cuchillo —repitió Esch.

—Si es un desertor, lo fusilarán —dijo Huguenau dando por concluido el caso, y Esch vio ante sí el consejo de guerra en la consabida sala del tribunal, vio al comandante de la plaza actuando como presidente del tribunal, oyó su despiadado veredicto y vio cómo el hombre era conducido, bajo la lluvia que chapoteaba en el patio de la cárcel, ante el pelotón de ejecución, y cómo se limpiaba por última vez con las manos maniatadas aquel rostro por el que corrían a un tiempo el agua, las lágrimas y el sudor frío.

Esch era un hombre de comportamientos impetuosos; el mundo se dividía para él en blanco y negro, y le parecía dominado por el juego de las fuerzas buenas y malas. Pero, con frecuencia, su impetuosidad le empujaba a confundir las personas con las cosas y, así, era más propenso a hacer responsable al mayor del inhumano acto que iba a cometerse con aquel pobre desertor que al frío y cruel militarismo. Estaba a punto de decirle a Huguenau que el mayor era un cerdo, cuando, de repente, comprendió que algo fallaba: de repente, no sabía a qué atenerse, porque de repente resultaba inconcebible que el mayor y el autor de aquel artículo de fondo fueran la misma persona. El mayor no era un cerdo, el mayor era una persona de bien, el mayor había pasado de repente del lado negro del mundo al lado blanco.

Esch veía con toda claridad ante sus ojos el artículo de fondo del mayor, y sus ideas, aunque no muy claras, resultaban en cambio para él nobles, limpias y grandiosas; se le aparecían como parte de la superior misión de velar por la libertad y la justicia del mundo, lo cual resultaba tanto o más curioso considerando que él veía en ellas parte de su propia tarea, de su propia meta, si bien transmutada en una expresión tan elevada, diáfana y libre que todo cuanto había hecho hasta entonces le parecía opaco, angosto, prosaico y miope.

Esch se detuvo:

—Es preciso pagar —dijo.

Huguenau se sintió desagradablemente aludido:

—Para usted es muy fácil decirlo, a usted no van a fusilarle.

Esch movió la cabeza, hizo con la mano un gesto entre despectivo y desesperado:

—Si solo se tratara de eso… Se trata de ser honesto… ¿Sabe usted que hubo un tiempo en que yo quería formar parte de una asociación de librepensadores?

—¿Y qué?

—No debería usted hablar así. La Biblia dice algo al respecto. Lea usted el artículo del mayor.

—Bonito artículo.

—¿Entonces…?

Huguenau reflexionó:

—Es poco probable que vuelva a escribir un artículo para nosotros… Ahora conviene publicar cosas de otro tipo… Pero, naturalmente, tendré que ocuparme yo, como siempre… A usted no se le ocurre nada. ¡Y pretendía editar un periódico!

Esch le miró con desesperación: con semejante pedazo de carne era evidente que no se podía llegar a nada, aquel tipo o no comprendía o no quería comprender. A Esch le hubiera gustado pegarle.

—Si usted es el ángel que vino para sacarlo adelante, yo prefiero mil veces ser el demonio —le gritó.

—Ninguno de nosotros somos ángeles —filosofó Huguenau.

Esch se dio por vencido; de todos modos, habían llegado.

Marguerite jugaba en el corredor con un par de críos de la vecindad. Les miró enfadada porque venían a estorbar, pero Esch, sin hacerle caso, la cogió y la sentó sobre su nuca, sosteniéndola con fuerza por las piernas.

—¡Cuidado con las puertas! —gritó Esch, al tiempo que se agachaba al cruzar el umbral.

Huguenau les siguió.

Cuando treparon por la escalera y Marguerite, oscilante en lo alto de la rampa, miró hacia abajo —hacia el patio, que se veía extrañamente grande, y hacia el jardín, que se tambaleaba—, sintió miedo, agarró con fuerza la frente de Esch e intentó arañarle los ojos con las uñas.

—¡Calma ahí arriba! —ordenó Esch—. Y cuidado con la puerta.

Pero de nada sirvió que él se agachara: Marguerite se puso tiesa, echó el busto hacia atrás, su cabeza chocó contra el dintel y se echó a llorar. Esch, habituado desde que tenía uso de razón a consolar con una caricia a las mujeres que lloraban, la bajó hasta la altura de su cara e intentó besarla, pero la niña pataleó y quiso arañarle de nuevo los ojos, de modo que él, de grado o por fuerza, tuvo que dejarla en el suelo y soltarla. Marguerite intentó escapar, pero allí estaba Huguenau, de pie y dispuesto a atraparla. Huguenau había contemplado divertido los esfuerzos de la niña para deshacerse de Esch y si ahora, en lugar de huir, la pequeña se quedaba con él, constituiría una gran satisfacción. Mas cuando vio su rostro ceñudo no se atrevió a retenerla sino que, haciendo un arco con las piernas, dijo:

—Aquí está la puerta.

La pequeña comprendió, se echó a reír y pasó a cuatro patas por debajo. Esch la siguió con la mirada:

—Sería capaz de matarlo a uno sin el menor miramiento —dijo en un tono como conmovido—, esta pícara negrita.

—Realmente parece que a usted le hace gracia… Bueno, pronto tendré que instalar aquí mi escritorio.

—Yo no puedo impedírselo —refunfuñó Esch—, de todos modos ya va siendo hora de que se preocupe de los asuntos de la redacción.

Huguenau todavía pensaba en la niña:

—La pequeña está siempre correteando por aquí.

Esch sonrió ligeramente:

—Los niños son una bendición y también una plaga, señor Huguenau, pero usted no entiende de eso.

—Hay algo que comprendo muy bien, y es que usted está loco por la niña… ¿Por qué si no iba a querer adoptar semejante bestezuela no siendo suya?

—Mía o de otro, ¡qué más da!, ya se lo dije una vez.

—Qué más da, no, si es otro el que tuvo el placer.

—Usted no lo comprende —gritó Esch levantándose de un salto.

Dio varias vueltas por la habitación, después se acercó al rincón donde se amontonaban los periódicos y cogió uno, el número especial, y empezó a leer con suma atención el artículo del mayor.

Huguenau le observó con interés. Esch sostenía su cabeza con las dos manos, su pelo corto y gris sobresalía por entre los dedos como las cerdas de un cepillo; parecía enfrascado, casi ascético, y Huguenau, queriendo apartar de su mente un persistente recuerdo oscuro y desagradable, dijo con voz animada:

—A ver si piensa usted algo que nos ayude a salir adelante con el periódico, Esch.

—El mayor es una buena persona.

—Sí —dijo Huguenau—, pero será mejor que piense usted qué se puede hacer con el periódico —se había acercado a Esch y, como para despertarlo, le daba golpecitos en el hombro—. *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* necesita que lo soliciten de Berlín y de Nüremberg, y también del café de la Hauptwache de Frankfurt, ya conoce usted Frankfurt, también allí ha de estar el periódico… Ha de convertirse en un periódico universal.

Esch no le prestaba atención. Señaló con el dedo unas líneas del artículo:

—Esto de que las obras no convierten a nadie en piadoso y que el ser humano tiene que ser piadoso antes de realizar sus obras, ¿sabe qué quiere decir? Pues que no depende de la niña sino del modo de pensar; que sea propia o de otro, tanto da, ¿me oye usted?, ¡tanto da!

Por algún motivo, Huguenau se sintió decepcionado:

—Yo solo sé que es usted un loco y que con su modo de pensar ha llevado el periódico a la ruina.

Y salió de la habitación.

La puerta llevaba ya mucho rato cerrada, pero Esch seguía mirándola fijamente, desde su asiento, sin moverse, cavilando. No estaba muy claro, pero Huguenau podía tener razón en lo del modo de pensar. No obstante, parecía que ahora iba a ser posible poner un poco de orden. El mundo se dividía entre lo bueno y lo malo, el haber y el deber, lo blanco y lo negro, y, aunque podía suceder que se filtrara un error de contabilidad, había que subsanarlo y se subsanaría. Esch fue tranquilizándose. Sus manos descansaban pacíficamente sobre sus rodillas, estaba tranquilamente sentado mirando, con los párpados entornados,

hacia la puerta y toda la habitación, y esta se convertía de un modo extraño en un paisaje —¿o era una tarjeta postal?—, con una especie de quiosco bajo los verdes árboles, árboles de la colina del castillo de Badenweiler. Vio el rostro del mayor y era el rostro de un ser superior, elevado. Y Esch estuvo tanto rato así sentado y lleno de admiración que, al final, ya no sabía dónde se hallaba y, solo con un gran esfuerzo, volvió a concentrarse en la lectura. Y, aunque hubiera podido recitar el artículo de memoria, frase por frase, se esforzó en continuar leyéndolo y supo así de nuevo qué sitio le correspondía a él en el mundo. Porque las observaciones del mayor, dirigidas al pueblo alemán, habían causado gran impacto en una parte de la nación, si bien no en una parte importante, y dicha parte era precisamente el señor Esch.

XXXVI

Cuatro mujeres limpiaban la sala de los enfermos.

El doctor Kuhlenbeck, médico jefe de Estado Mayor, entró, los miró a todos unos instantes y dijo:

—Bueno, ¿qué tal estáis?

—¿Cómo quiere que estemos, doctor?

Las mujeres suspiraron, luego siguieron limpiando. Una de ellas levantó la cabeza:

—Mi marido viene con permiso la próxima semana.

—Estupendo, Tielden… La cama temblará…

La señora Tielden enrojeció visiblemente, pese al tono moreno de su cutis. Las otras se rieron. Y la señora Tielden unió su risa a la de ellas.

De pronto, de una de las camas surgió algo así como un ladrido, una especie de suspiro sofocado, plúmbeo, lleno de dolor, algo que no llegaba a ser un sonido y que salía de lo más hondo.

El reservista Gödicke estaba sentado en su cama; sus facciones se habían contraído en una mueca de dolor. Era él quien reía de forma tan particular.

Era el primer sonido que articulaba desde que lo ingresaron (sin contar como tales los gemidos de los primeros días).

—Vaya con el marrano —dijo el médico jefe de Estado Mayor doctor Kuhlenbeck—, de eso sí es capaz de reírse.

XXXVII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 5

Primavera marchita de leyes hechas piedra,
primavera marchita de la novia judía,
rumor sordo y marchito de la urbe, que yace
silenciosa y cautiva de una red invisible;
jornada de verano hecha de piedra,
piedra sobre la cual no se posa el rocío;
luce un cielo marchito sobre plazas de asfalto
y calles retorcidas, y la piedra, cual costra,
sobre la piel grisácea de la tierra se extiende.
¡Ciudad de falsas luces! ¡Ciudad de falsos brillos!
El penitente huye del verdor de los árboles,
porque prefiere un sitio —cueva de penitencia—
donde todo lo santo de la Ley se levante
y mane, como fuente, del pensamiento oculto
en el Libro Sagrado, del titubeo y dudas.
Ciudad de caminantes, ciudad de penitentes
cautivos de la angustia, ciudad de los ascetas:
es la ciudad del pueblo que, elegido por Dios,
sin placer va creciendo, solo por contar hijos.
Pueblo cuyos ancianos en las ventanas rezan,
pueblo de monacales barbas que, eternamente,
sus bodas con Jehová celebran con oficios
rituales y correas e instrumentos de culto;
y mientras, las mujeres amasan panes grasos
y arde una lamparilla de aceite iluminando
débilmente las fiestas de los aniversarios;
pueblo que sus mujeres toma en su lecho para
reproducirse en ellas y en ellas engendrar
al pálido muchacho de la barba postiza,
a Jacob ante el cual los ángeles se inclinan

y al cual le será un día dictada la verdad;
guía que nos indica el camino hasta el pozo,
pozo al que descendieron los ángeles y donde
bebían las ovejas de la joven Raquel.
¡Oh, ciudad gris!, descanso de los nómadas ocres
en la ruta que lleva a Sión y hasta Dios.
Ciudad impía, presa en una red vacía, vacía
área de piedra cargada de dolor;
ciudad donde sus himnos con suavidad entona
el tenaz Ejército de Salvación a coro
para que al Mal renuncie el pecador y halle
el camino de vuelta a su hogar y a su Dios;
camino verdadero y que, de gracia lleno,
conduce hasta Sión por obra del Amor.
En la ciudad de Berlín y en aquella primavera
encontró Nuchem Sussin a Marie salutista;
dudaron unos instantes con dulce vacilación,
pero sus almas al fin de rodillas se postraron:
no sentían las pesadas garras del duro destino;
ante ellos vieron Sión y todo fue acción de gracias.

XXXVIII

Heinrich Wendling no había tenido permiso desde hacía unos dos años. Sin embargo, cuando llegó la carta en que Heinrich anunciaba que volvía al hogar, Hanna quedó muy sorprendida, tan sorprendida como si de pronto hubiera sucedido algo incomprensible e irracional. El viaje desde Salónica duraba, por lo menos, seis días y tal vez más, pero de cualquier modo era cuestión de días. Hanna temía su regreso como si tuviera que ocultarle un amante secreto. Cada día de retraso le parecía un regalo. No obstante, cada noche se aseaba con más cuidado que de costumbre y cada mañana permanecía en la cama más tiempo de lo habitual, esperando, temiendo que el que, sucio y sin afeitar, regresaba al hogar con permiso tomara inmediatamente posesión de ella. Y aunque en realidad se avergonzaba de esos pensamientos, que la llevaban a desear que una ofensiva o cualquier otra desgracia frustraran el permiso, sentía sin embargo que otra esperanza, aún más fuerte y extraña, se filtraba por entre dichos pensamientos; una especie de intuición de la que nada quería saber y nada sabía y que le recordaba la sensación que se experimenta cuando se tiene en perspectiva una operación delicada; había que someterse a ella para evitarse algo ineludible, algo hacia lo que, en caso contrario, se iría a parar inexorablemente; era como un último y espantoso recurso, oscuro sí, pero equivalente a la salvación ante una oscuridad mucho más profunda. Tildar de masoquismo este comportamiento, este temor esperanzado y esta expectativa horrorizada, sería quedarse en la simple superficie del alma. Y la explicación que de su estado habría podido dar, como ser consciente, la propia Hanna no difería en esencia de la absurda opinión de las mujeres viejas que ven en el matrimonio el único remedio para acabar de una vez y para siempre con los padecimientos de las muchachas enfermizas. No, ella no se atrevía a seguir pensando en ello, era como una maleza en la que no quería penetrar, y si confiaba en que, con el regreso de Heinrich, se restableciera el orden natural, también intuía, y con idéntica intensidad, que dicho orden estaba perdido para siempre.

El verano había llegado definitivamente. La Casa de las Rosas hacía honor a su nombre a pesar de que, conforme a las necesidades del momento, el cuidado de las verduras se anteponía al de las flores, y a que el enfermizo aprendiz de jardinero no daba abasto para todo. Sin embargo, las *crimson rumblers* no se dejaban abatir por la guerra y se alzaban hasta las figuras decorativas junto a la puerta de entrada, las peonías lucían colores blanco y rosa, y las hileras de heliotropos y de alhelíes que bordeaban el césped habían florecido del todo. El verde paisaje se extendía apacible ante la casa, y la larga hondonada del valle recogía la mirada para conducirla hasta la linde del bosque. La casa del guardabosques, cuyas ventanas eran visibles en invierno, había desaparecido bajo el verdor; también los viñedos eran ahora verdes y el bosque una quieta mancha oscura, más oscura aún en este momento, debido a que negros nubarrones se cernían sobre las montañas.

Aquella tarde Hanna había instalado su tumbona delante de la casa. Se hallaba recostada bajo los castaños, mirando el movimiento de las nubes, cuya sombra se proyectaba sobre los campos y transformaba el verde claro y diáfano en un verde oscuro extrañamente violeta, que daba sensación de paz; y, cuando la sombra alcanzó el jardín y de pronto el aire se tornó fresco, con un frescor de bodega, las flores, cerradas hasta este momento por el calor, empezaron súbitamente a exhalar su aroma, como si su aliento hubiera sido liberado. O tal vez era aquel repentino frescor lo que hacía que Hanna notara el perfume de las flores, pero todo había sido tan imprevisto, tan único, tan vehemente; aquella ola de dulce perfume que se acercaba era tan fresca y mágica como una noche en los jardines del sur, como un

crepúsculo en la costa rocosa de un mar tirrénico. Así, la tierra se recostaba a orillas de la nube, la cual enviaba hacia abajo sus efluvios, una lluvia de tormenta nutricia y suave, y Hanna, de pie ante la abierta puerta de la balconada, olía el sur y, aunque aspiró casi con frenesí la humedad que fresca y nueva le penetraba por la nariz, recordó en aquel olor la angustia que sintió por primera vez junto a la orilla del mar en Sicilia, una tarde de lluvia durante su viaje de bodas: las flores del jardín exhalaban un perfume penetrante y ella no sabía quién era el desconocido que estaba de pie a su lado: se llamaba doctor Wendling.

Se asustó. El jardinero se acercaba corriendo por la alameda, a fin de poner a resguardo de la lluvia los muebles del jardín; se asustó: aunque sabía exactamente cuál era la intención de aquel hombre no pudo dejar de pensar en un ladrón. Si Walter no se hubiera acercado a ella, ella se habría refugiado en su habitación y habría cerrado las puertas. Pero Walter se sentó en el umbral, extendió hacia afuera sus piernas desnudas, para que la lluvia las mojara, y se empeñó en arrancarse de la rodilla una costra seca; luego, muy satisfecho, se acarició la piel nueva y rosada. También Hanna se sentó en el umbral y se rodeó las piernas con las manos, aquellas piernas suyas tan esbeltas y bonitas —para estar en el jardín de su casa, tampoco ella se ponía medias—, y sus lisas pantorrillas se notaban frescas al tacto.

La misma lluvia que, al principio, había suscitado el perfume de las flores, ahora estaba sofocándolo, y solo olía tierra mojada. El tejado de la casa del jardinero, de tejas moteadas de pardo, relucía ahora al estar mojado y, cuando el jardinero volvió a cruzar la alameda, la gravilla no crujió de sequedad sino que sonó como a grano y cosa recién lavada. Hanna pasó el brazo por encima del hombro del chico —¿Por qué no podían estar siempre así, sentados juntos, en paz, encajados en un mundo ordenado, limpio y fresco?— y, aunque ya no tenía tanto miedo, dijo sin embargo:

—Si esta noche hay tormenta como ahora, puedes dormir en mi habitación, Walter.

XXXIX

Cuando el médico jefe de Estado Mayor doctor Kuhlenbeck entró, en compañía del doctor Kessel, en el comedor de la hospedería, el mayor estaba sentado en su sitio de costumbre. Leía el periódico de Colonia, precisamente recién llegado. Los dos caballeros saludaron y el mayor se levantó invitándoles a sentarse a su mesa.

El médico jefe de Estado mayor, con absoluta falta de tacto, señaló el periódico:

—¿Tendremos el placer de leerle en otros periódicos?

El mayor se limitó a mover la cabeza. Y, tendiendo el periódico al que acaba de hablar, señaló las informaciones relativas a la guerra:

—Malas noticias.

El médico jefe echó un vistazo a la información:

—En realidad, no son peores que otras veces, comandante. —El mayor le miró interrogativamente—: ¿Solo hay una buena noticia, no, comandante? Y se llama paz.

—En eso lleva usted razón —repuso el mayor.

—Bien —dijo Kuhlenbeck levantando su vaso—, brindemos, pues, por la paz.

Los otros dos chocaron sus vasos con él y el mayor insistió:

—Por una paz honrosa… ¿Para qué, si no, se habrían hecho tantos sacrificios? —Retuvo el vaso en la mano, como si quisiera decir algo más, pero permaneció callado; cuando, finalmente, rompió su mutismo, dijo—: El honor no es un simple convencionalismo… Años atrás, el uso de gases asfixiantes habría sido prohibido.

Los tres bebieron sus vasos en silencio.

Luego el doctor Kessel dijo:

—¿De qué sirven las mejores teorías sobre la alimentación en tiempos de guerra…? Cuando por las noches vuelvo a mi casa, apenas me sostienen las piernas; para un hombre de cierta edad esta alimentación no es suficiente.

—Es usted un derrotista, Kessel —dijo Kuhlenbeck—. Según está demostrado, la diabetes ha descendido a un mínimo, y parece ser que también el cáncer… Sencillamente, tiene usted la mala suerte de no ser diabético… Por otra parte, mi querido colega, si le pesan a usted las piernas… No nos estamos volviendo precisamente jóvenes.

El mayor Von Pasenow dijo:

—El honor no es la pereza del sentimiento.

—No comprendo, comandante —dijo el médico jefe Kuhlenbeck.

El mayor miró al vacío:

—¡Bah!, no decía nada… Como usted sabe, mi hijo cayó ante Verdún… Dentro de poco cumpliría veintiocho años…

—Pero tiene usted más familia, ¿verdad, comandante?

De momento, el mayor no contestó; tal vez la pregunta le parecía indiscreta. Por fin dijo:

—Sí, el más pequeño y las dos chicas… Al chico… muy pronto lo llamarán a filas… Hay que dar al rey lo que es del rey —calló un momento y luego prosiguió—: No se le da a Dios lo que es de Dios. Ahí radica el mal.

—Ni siquiera se le da al hombre lo que es del hombre… —dijo el doctor Kuhlenbeck—. Opino que habría que ir por ahí.

—Primero es Dios —dijo el mayor Von Pasenow.

Kuhlenbeck alzó el mentón; su barba canosa flotó en el aire:

—Nosotros los médicos no somos más que unos sórdidos materialistas.

El mayor denegó con benevolencia:

—No diga usted eso.

El doctor Kessel tampoco compartía este punto de vista:

—Un auténtico médico es siempre un idealista.

Kuhlenbeck rió:

—Cierto, me olvidaba de su consultorio del seguro social.

Al cabo de un rato, el doctor Kessel dijo:

—Apenas vuelva a ser posible, me dedicaré otra vez a mi música de cámara.

El mayor dijo que a su mujer también le gustaba tocar. Meditó un poco y luego añadió:

—Spohr, un buen compositor.

XL

Cuando se hizo público y sabido que Gödicke se había reído, sus compañeros de habitación intentaron por todos los medios que volviera a reír. Le contaron los chistes más procaces y, cuando estaba acostado, rara era la vez que alguno de ellos pasara sin mover los muelles de su cama para conseguir que se riera. Pero no sirvió de nada. Gödicke no volvió a reír. Permanecía mudo.

Hasta que, un día, entró la enfermera Carla trayéndole una postal del frente:

—Gödicke, le ha escrito su mujer…

Gödicke no se movió.

—Se la voy a leer.

Y la enfermera Carla le leyó que su fiel esposa hacía mucho tiempo que no sabía nada de él, que tanto ella como los niños estaban bien y que todos confiaban en que regresaría pronto.

—Contestaré por usted —dijo la enfermera Carla.

Gödicke no había dado muestra alguna de comprensión y era muy fácil pensar que en realidad no había entendido nada. Y es muy posible que hubiera logrado ocultar ante cualquiera que lo observara la tempestad de su alma, aquella tempestad que, agitando todos los fragmentos de su Yo, los hacía ascender con rapidez a la superficie para, con idéntica velocidad, volver a hundirlos en aquella ola oscura; que hubiera logrado calmar la tempestad y detenerla poco a poco si, en aquel momento, el gracioso de la habitación, el soldado de dragones Josef Sattler, no hubiera pasado por allí y no se hubiera colgado, como de costumbre, de los pies de la cama para hacerla bailar. Entonces el reservista Gödicke emitió un grito que en nada se parecía a la risa que de él se esperaba, risa a la que en realidad estaba obligado. Emitió un grito sordo y lleno de rabia, se sentó, pero sin la torpeza y la dificultad habituales en él, arrebató la postal de manos de la enfermera y la rompió en mil pedazos. Luego se dejó caer hacia atrás; lo brusco del movimiento le había producido dolores espantosos y se sostenía el bajo vientre.

Y así quedó, tendido boca arriba, mirando al techo e intentando poner urgentemente un poco de orden en sus pensamientos. Era consciente de haber obrado bien; había rechazado con absoluta justicia al intruso. El hecho de que el intruso fuera la criada Anna Lamprecht junto con sus tres hijos carecía de importancia y podía volver a olvidarse con rapidez. Se alegraba de haber sido precisamente él quien hubiera calmado con tanta velocidad al hombre que había contraído matrimonio con la criada Lamprecht y quien lo hubiera devuelto a su sitio detrás de la oscura barrera: allí debía esperar hasta que lo llamaran. No obstante, el asunto no estaba liquidado todavía: el que viene una vez puede volver aunque no le llamen y, cuando en una ocasión uno ha abierto una puerta, todas las demás puertas pueden abrirse solas. Lleno de pánico, sentía, aunque no habría sabido expresarlo, que toda intromisión en cualquier parte de su alma influía en las demás partes y que todas ellas sufrirían algún cambio. Era como un zumbido en los oídos, un zumbido del alma, un zumbido del Yo que bramaba con tal fuerza que él lo percibía en todo su cuerpo, pero también era como una mordaza de tierra colocada debajo de la lengua, una mordaza que ahoga y que le cambia a uno todos los pensamientos. O tal vez era otra cosa; en cualquier caso era una poderosísima fuerza a la que se sentía ligado. Era como intentar extender la masa de mortero sobre una hilera de

ladrillos y que el mortero ya se hubiera solidificado en la paleta. Parecía como si aquí hubiera un maestro de obras que exigiera un ritmo de trabajo insensato e imposible, obligando a colocar los ladrillos a tanta velocidad que estos se amontonaban en el andamio y se hacía imposible trabajar. El andamio se hundiría si, para detener lo alocado del ritmo, no se utilizaban a la vez el torno y la hormigonera. Lo mejor sería que los ojos volvieran a cerrarse con una membrana y que los oídos se taponaran de nuevo; el hombre Gödicke no debía ver, ni oír, ni comer nada. Si en este momento no tuviera dolores tan molestos, saldría al jardín y cogería un puñado de tierra para taponarse sus agujeros. Y mientras se sostenía el maldito bajo vientre del que habían manado sus hijos, mientras se lo apretaba con las manos como si nunca más tuviera que manar nada de él, mientras apretaba los dientes y contraía los labios para que ni siquiera una vez se escapara de ellos un suspiro de dolor, le pareció que así sus fuerzas aumentaban, que dichas fuerzas podrían, al aumentar, construir cada vez más alto y más claro el andamio, que él, como si fuera omnipresente, estaba en todos los pisos y rellanos del andamio y, finalmente, que se hallaba completamente solo en la planta más alta, en la cima del andamio, y que podía estar allí de pie, sin sentir dolor, libre y cantando como cantaba siempre que se encontraba en lo más alto. Por debajo de él, los carpinteros trabajarían martilleando, clavando clavos, y él escupiría hacia abajo como lo había hecho siempre, lanzando en arco y por encima de ellos el salivazo, y allí donde se estrellara crecerían árboles, árboles que, por mucho que crecieran, jamás lograrían llegar hasta él.

Cuando la enfermera Carla se acercó con la jofaina y los paños, él estaba echado, tranquilo, y se dejó poner las compresas pacíficamente. Durante dos días rechazó de nuevo bebida y alimentos. Después se produjo el acontecimiento durante el cual comenzó a hablar.

XLI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 6

Incluso con gran sorpresa por mi parte, reanudé mis trabajos de filosofía de la historia dedicados a la degradación de los valores. A pesar de que apenas salía de casa, mi trabajo avanzaba con lentitud. Nuchem Sussin entraba a veces a verme y se sentaba sobre los grises faldones de su levitón. Nunca se lo desabotonaba; probablemente se lo impedía una especie de pudor. Con frecuencia yo me preguntaba cómo aquella gente podía confiar en el doctor Litwak, el cual, con su chaqueta corta, parecía burlarse de sus ideas. Hasta que al fin encontré una explicación: el bastón de paseo que el doctor Litwak llevaba siempre consigo constituía una a modo de compensación por su carencia de prendas más largas. Pero, naturalmente, solo era una suposición mía.

Estuve mucho tiempo sin conseguir averiguar qué era lo que en realidad quería Sussin. Cuando se sentaba, nunca se olvidaba de decir: «Tenga la bondad de permitirme…» y, tras una pausa de embarazoso silencio, surgía luego algún problema de tipo jurídico: si el gobierno tenía facultad para confiscar los alimentos y las materias grasas que la gente tenía ya en sus casas o incluso en el plato; si el subsidio que recibían las mujeres de los soldados podría convertirse, en caso de fallecimiento, en un seguro… En realidad no se veía adónde pretendía ir a parar con todo aquello, parecía como si quisiera anudar al azar una serie de cabos cualesquiera, y daba la sensación de que, de todo ello, surgirían auténticos problemas, o bien que en su interior iba desarrollándose un panorama jurídico que uno se veía obligado a observar a través de aquellos telescopios artificiales y retorcidos.

Aunque cogiera un libro y lo acercara a sus ojos miopes, parecía como si estuviera leyendo cosas muy distintas de las que contenía. Sentía un respeto desmesurado por todos los libros, pero, ante una simple línea de Kant, era capaz de reírse descontroladamente y se extrañaba de que yo no hiciera como él. Por ello le pareció un chiste buenísimo encontrar en Hegel la siguiente frase: «El principio de la magia consiste en que no se conoce el nexo entre el medio y el resultado». Lo más seguro es que me despreciara por no ver, como él, el fondo y la comicidad de las cosas, y lo más curioso es que yo me inclinaba a reconocer que su punto de vista era más exacto, aunque más complejo. En todo caso, estas fueron las únicas ocasiones en que le vi reír.

Además tenía cierta relación con la música. De la pared de mi habitación colgaba un laúd con muchas cintas. Creo que había pertenecido al hijo de la dueña del piso, hijo que o estaba en la cárcel o había desaparecido. Cada vez que venía, Sussin me pedía: «Toque usted», y cuando yo le decía que no sabía, se negaba a creerme. Lo cogía con un exceso de timidez. Pero por este camino llegó al fin al tema que le interesaba: «¿Ha oído usted tocar a esa gente… a esos que van de uniforme…? Es muy bonito».

Se refería a los del Ejército de Salvación, y sonrió cohibido porque yo lo adiviné. «Esta noche voy a oírles. ¿Vendrá usted conmigo?»

XLII

La alegría de Huguenau por el periódico no duró mucho tiempo, ni siquiera llegó a un mes. Aún no había acabado junio, cuando Huguenau ya estaba harto. Con el entusiasmo inicial había conseguido la gran hazaña del número especial y de los artículos especiales, pero, como a continuación no se le ocurrió ninguna idea nueva, perdió el entusiasmo. Parecía que hubiese arrinconado un juguete; ya no le gustaba. Y aunque detrás de esta actitud siguiera estando su visión, más que acertada, por supuesto, de que no podía sacarse un gran periódico de un periódico de provincias, la verdad es que estaba sencillamente aburrido, y no quería saber pura y simplemente nada más de la marcha del periódico. Si antes le parecía siempre que no se daba la suficiente prisa en acudir a su trabajo, ahora en cambio se quedaba remoloneando en la cama, alargaba el desayuno más de lo normal y se encaminaba de mala gana a la parte trasera del edificio. Con frecuencia, incluso se detenía en la cocina de la señora Esch para hablar con ella del precio de los alimentos. Y, cuando por fin se hallaba en la oficina de redacción, la mayor parte de las veces se escapaba silenciosamente escaleras abajo y se dirigía a la imprenta.

Marguerite jugaba en el jardín. Huguenau le gritó desde el otro lado del patio:

—Marguerite, estoy en la imprenta.

La niña salió corriendo a su encuentro y entraron juntos.

—Buenas —dijo Huguenau lacónicamente, pues, desde que Lindner y su ayudante se habían convertido en subordinados suyos, procuraba ser muy lacónico con ellos. De todos modos, ninguno de los dos se inmutó, y Huguenau volvió a tener la impresión de que le despreciaban porque no entendía nada de máquinas. En aquel momento estaban componiendo un texto y Huguenau, con la pequeña de la mano, se esforzó en mirarles por encima de los hombros con aires de entendido, pero, cuando salieron fuera y le dejaron solo con la máquina impresora, se alegró.

La máquina de imprimir le seguía gustando, pues a un hombre que se ha pasado la vida vendiendo mercancías producidas a máquina, pero para el cual tanto las máquinas como sus propietarios han sido algo superior y una realidad inaccesible, a un hombre así le parecerá de seguro un acontecimiento excepcional llegar a poseer personalmente alguna máquina; y es muy probable que en él se desarrolle para con la máquina el trato afectuoso que casi siempre se da en los muchachos y en los pueblos jóvenes, trato que hace de la máquina un héroe y que la proyecta hasta el plano más elevado y libre de los deseos personales y de las grandes hazañas. Un muchacho es capaz de pasarse horas y horas en la estación observando una locomotora y de alegrarse profundamente de que la locomotora lleve algunos vagones de una vía a otra, y Wilhelm Huguenau podía estarse horas y horas sentado ante la máquina de imprimir contemplándola, a través de los cristales de sus gafas, con la mirada seria y vacía de un muchacho, con una satisfacción sin límites al ver que se movía, tragaba papeles y luego los devolvía. Y el desmesurado amor que sentía por este ser vivo le embargaba hasta el punto de impedir que de él brotara la más mínima ambición o el menor intento de comprender la incomprensible y maravillosa función de la máquina; aceptaba la máquina con admiración, con ternura y casi con temor; la aceptaba tal y como era.

Marguerite se había encaramado en los rollos de papel y Huguenau había tomado asiento en un banco tosco que había allí. Contemplaba la máquina, contemplaba a la niña. La máquina era suya, le pertenecía; la niña pertenecía a Esch. Durante un rato estuvieron tirándose una pelota hecha de papel; luego Huguenau se cansó de jugar, cruzó las piernas y, mientras se limpiaba los cristales de las gafas, dijo:

—Aún se podría hacer algo con los anuncios. —La niña jugaba con la pelota de papel. Huguenau prosiguió—: No me lo imaginaba todo tan mal. Se ha pagado demasiado por el periódico… De todos modos, tenemos la imprenta… Oye, ¿te gusta la impresora?

—¡Sí!, juguemos a impresores, tío Huguenau.

Marguerite se deslizó desde los montones de papel hasta el suelo y trepó a sus piernas. Entonces se cogieron por los brazos y, al mismo tiempo que movían el busto, regularmente, hacia delante y hacia atrás, imitaban el ruido de la máquina:

—Pum, pum.

Huguenau frenó. Marguerite se quedó a horcajadas sobre sus rodillas. Huguenau respiraba con cierta fatiga:

—Se ha pagado demasiado por el periódico… Si todo va bien, podremos tirar hasta cuatrocientos ejemplares… Pero si conseguimos dos páginas de anuncios haremos un buen negocio y seremos ricos. ¿Verdad que sí, Marguerite?

Marguerite cabalgaba sobre sus rodillas y Huguenau la hizo saltar como si fuera al trote; la niña se reía porque él repetía a cada salto:

—Sí, tú serás rica. Tú serás rica. ¿No te alegras, Marguerite?

—Entonces me darás mucho dinero.

—¡Ah, ¿sí?!

—Mucho dinero.

—¿Sabes, Marguerite? Contrataremos a algunos muchachos para que consigan anuncios… por los pueblos… por todas partes. Trabajarán a comisión.

La niña asentía muy seria.

—Ya lo tengo todo calculado… Anuncios de bodas, de ventas, etc., etc. Ve a buscar los modelos de anuncio del señor Lindner. —Y gritó hacia el cuarto donde componían—: ¡Lindner!, los modelos de anuncios.

La niña regresó con los modelos.

—Mira, les daremos a los agentes estos modelos… Verás cómo gustan. —Se sentó de nuevo a la niña en el regazo y, juntos, estudiaron los modelos. Luego Huguenau dijo—: O sea que, con el dinero, les dirás adiós… ¿Y adónde quieres ir?

Marguerite se encogió de hombros:

—Lejos.

Huguenau reflexionó:

—Yendo por Eifel, llegarás a Bélgica. Allí vive buena gente.

—¿Vendrás conmigo?

—Quizá… Más adelante, sí…

—¿Y cuándo es más adelante?

La niña se apretujó cariñosa contra él, pero Huguenau dijo de pronto con brusquedad:

—Basta.

Se levantó y la puso sobre la impresora. Con extraña claridad le vino a la mente la imagen de aquel asesino de niños, del sádico torturador de niños encadenado, y esta idea le puso nervioso.

—Cada cosa a su tiempo —dijo contemplando a la niña, que se movía con ligereza por encima de la sólida e inmóvil máquina, como si no pesara, pero formando, no obstante y de algún modo, parte del conjunto. Si la máquina se pusiera en marcha, se tragaría a Marguerite como se tragaba el papel, y se aseguró de que la palanca estaba echada. Casi con miedo, repitió—: Cada cosa a su tiempo… Ya llegará la ocasión… De todos modos, aquí él no nos estorba.

Y mientras reflexionaba acerca de para qué tenía que llegar la ocasión, se le ocurrió que el tal Esch, con su dentadura caballuna, el tal maestro flaco e insoportable, nunca le dejaba tranquilo sino que, invocando el contrato, siempre intentaba colgarle a él una y otra vez los trabajos de la redacción, «invoca el contrato y exige que yo me pase todo el día allí, sentado, y probablemente llegará incluso a exigirme que me ponga un blusón azul. ¡Un tipo como él puede defender sus derechos, pero no imponer sus ideas, ni por unas cochinas perras!». Y, al pensar que el señor maestro no había logrado hacerle trabajar ni una sola vez, Huguenau se sintió invadido por un extraordinario bienestar.

Mientras seguía ordenando los modelos de los anuncios, dijo:

—Algún día le ajustaremos las cuentas al señor maestro, ¿verdad, Marguerite?

—Bájame de aquí —dijo la niña.

Huguenau se acercó a la máquina, pero cuando la pequeña le rodeó el cuello con los brazos, se quedó quieto un momento, meditando, porque acababa de comprender que aquel maestro ¡le había sido confiado en secreto!, ¡pero si él mismo se había ofrecido para vigilar y espiar a aquel hombre y el mayor había dado su aprobación! A Huguenau le pareció entonces que lo habían enviado allí solo para encontrar la auténtica meta de su vida, que la vida adquiriría todo su sentido si lograba descubrir todos los enlaces secretos del señor Esch. Así era, claro que sí, y Huguenau estampó un beso tiernísimo en la mejilla de Marguerite, embadurnada de la negra grasa de la impresora.

En cambio, el señor Esch se hallaba arriba, en la redacción, muy satisfecho de proseguir su trabajo sin tener que traspasárselo a Huguenau. Pues, por encima de todo, estaba convencido de que Huguenau jamás conseguiría dirigir el periódico según las directrices que el mayor había trazado y ponía todo su empeño en ocuparse él personalmente de ello a fin de servir así al mayor y a la buena causa.

XLIII

El doctor Flurschütz examinó en el quirófano el muñón del brazo de Jaretzki:

—Tiene un aspecto magnífico… El jefe le dará de alta uno de estos días… Si a usted le parece bien… Para trasladarse a algún centro de recuperación.

—Naturalmente que me parece bien; ya va siendo hora de salir de aquí.

—Lo mismo pienso yo, o habrá que retenerle por delírium trémens.

—¿Y qué otra cosa puede hacer uno sino emborracharse…? La verdad es que me he acostumbrado aquí.

—¿Antes no bebía nunca?

—Nunca… Bueno, un poco, como todo el mundo… Estaba en el politécnico de Brunswick, ¿sabe…?

¿Dónde se doctoró usted?

—En Erlangen.

—En ese caso, también usted bebería lo suyo… Es algo que forma parte de la vida de las ciudades pequeñas… Y cuando uno se pasa el día, como aquí, sentado por los rincones, entonces vuelves a beber sin darte cuenta…

El doctor Flurschütz examinaba aún el muñón del brazo.

—¿Ve usted?, ahí hay un punto infectado que se niega a cicatrizar. ¿Y cómo va mi brazo artificial?

—Ya está encargado. No dejaremos que se vaya sin él.

—Pues procure que llegue pronto… Si usted no tuviera trabajo, volvería a beber.

—No lo sé… Haría otras cosas… Todavía no se le ha visto a usted coger un libro, Jaretzki.

—Dígame, con toda franqueza, ¿de verdad lee usted todos los libros que se amontonan por los rincones de su habitación?

—Sí.

—Es curioso. ¿Y eso tiene algún sentido, algún objetivo?

—Desde luego, y nada insignificante.

—Entonces me tranquilizo… ¿Sabe una cosa, doctor Flurschütz…? Sí, sí, ya me estoy quieto… Usted ha ayudado a muchas personas a pasar de la vida a la muerte: para eso está usted aquí; pero cuando se ha matado de verdad a más de una… entonces no necesita uno coger un libro en lo que le resta de vida… Es lo que yo siento… Uno ya lo ha hecho todo… y por eso la guerra no acabará nunca…

—Bonita sarta de disparates, Jaretzki. ¿Cuánto ha bebido usted hoy?

—Nada, estoy sobrio como un niño…

—Bueno, hemos terminado… Dentro de quince días, como máximo, intentaremos colocarle la prótesis… y luego tendrá que ir usted a una escuela de esas… Porque usted quiere dibujar, ¿verdad?

—Digamos que sí, aunque no puedo imaginármelo.

—¿Y la Compañía General de Electricidad?

—Bueno, de momento, la escuela de recuperación… A veces pienso que me han cortado ustedes eso… sin necesidad… por sentido de la justicia, digamos: porque yo le tiré al francés la granada de mano entre las piernas…

Flurschütz le miró atentamente a los ojos:

—Cuidado, Jaretzki, no pierda usted el control, resulta usted inquietante… ¿cuánto ha bebido hoy de verdad?

—No merece la pena hablar de ello… Yo les quedo muy agradecido por su sentido de la justicia, y han operado ustedes de un modo prodigioso… Ahora me siento mucho mejor en este mundo… cochinamente bien… y todo arreglado. La Compañía General de Electricidad solo me espera a mí…

—En serio, Jaretzki, debería usted entrar en ella.

—Pero entérese de una vez… se han equivocado de brazo… Con este, fue con este —Jaretzki golpeó con dos dedos la encristalada superficie de la mesa de instrumental— con el que tiré la granada… Probablemente por eso me cuelga siempre como un trozo de plomo.

—Todo se arreglará, Jaretzki.

—De cualquier modo, todo está arreglado.

XLIV

Degradación de los valores 6

Es propio de la lógica del soldado tirarle a un enemigo una granada entre las piernas;

es propio de la lógica del militar explotar al máximo todos los medios del poder militar, explotarlos hasta las últimas consecuencias, con el mayor radicalismo y, si es necesario, exterminar pueblos, destruir catedrales, bombardear hospitales y salas de operaciones;

es propio de la lógica del economista explotar los medios económicos de un modo absoluto y hasta las últimas consecuencias y, destruyendo toda competencia, ayudar al propio ente económico —ya sea negocio, fábrica, trust o cualquier otro tipo de corporación económica— a alcanzar el dominio exclusivo;

es propio de la lógica del pintor llevar hasta el límite y hasta las últimas consecuencias los principios pictóricos, con un radicalismo total, aun a riesgo de que surja una pintura completamente esotérica solo comprensible para aquel que la produjo;

es propio de la lógica del revolucionario hacer que el ímpetu de la revolución prospere hasta las últimas consecuencias y con el mayor radicalismo, a fin de lograr el establecimiento de la auténtica revolución, como también es ciertamente propio de la lógica del político llevar su meta política hasta la dictadura más absoluta;

es propio de la lógica del fabricante burgués poner en práctica, con absoluto radicalismo y hasta sus últimas consecuencias, el lema «Enriqueceos». De este modo, con estas consecuencias y con este radicalismo absoluto, han surgido las realizaciones mundiales de Occidente, para ser llevadas al absurdo en virtud de ese carácter absoluto que se anula a sí mismo: la guerra es la guerra, el arte por el arte, en política no existen escrúpulos, el negocio es el negocio. Todo esto quiere decir lo mismo, todo esto viene determinado por el mismo radicalismo agresivo, por aquella falta de consideración espantosa que casi me atrevería a calificar de metafísica; viene determinado por aquella lógica cruel que solo se centra en el objetivo y nada más que en el objetivo, sin mirar a derecha y a izquierda. ¡Ah!, todo esto es el estilo del pensamiento de esta época.

Resulta imposible escapar a esta lógica brutal y agresiva, que surge de los valores y los no-valores todos de esta época, por mucho que uno se esconda en la soledad de un castillo o en el interior de una vivienda judía. No obstante, aquel que tema al conocimiento —o sea, un romántico preocupado por la impenetrabilidad del mundo y de los valores—, aquel que busque en el pasado la imagen ansiada, ese habrá de dirigir fundamentalmente su mirada hacia la Edad Media, pues la Edad Media poseía el centro ideal de los valores, poseía un valor supremo al que estaban sometidos todos los demás valores: la fe en un Dios cristiano. Incluso la cosmogonía dependía de ese valor central —más todavía: la cosmogonía podía deducirse escolásticamente de dicho valor— y el hombre mismo, el hombre juntamente con sus actos, también formaba parte de aquel orden del mundo que solo era la imagen refleja de una jerarquía eclesiástica, una copia, finita y cerrada en sí misma, de la armonía eterna e infinita. Para el comerciante medieval no regía lo de «el negocio es el negocio»: la lucha contra la competencia era para él algo prohibido; el artista medieval no conocía lo de «el arte por el arte»: únicamente servía a unas convicciones; la guerra medieval solo exigía la dignidad absoluta en la medida en que se hacía para servir al valor absoluto: para servir a la fe. Era un mundo que se apoyaba todo él en la fe, un mundo de fines y no de causas, un mundo fundado en el ser y no en el devenir, un mundo cuyas estructuras sociales, cuyo arte y cuyas ligaduras sociales se hallaban, como en resumen todo el andamiaje de sus valores, sometidos al valor vital que todo lo abarcaba: el de la fe. La fe era el punto de plausibilidad donde concluían todas las series de preguntas; la fe era lo que, impregnando a la lógica, le confería aquel matiz específico, aquella fuerza generadora de estilo que, en tanto la fe siga viva, pervivirá siempre como la expresión de una época y no solo de un estilo de pensamiento.

Pero el pensamiento osó dar el paso que va del monoteísmo a lo abstracto, y Dios —el Dios visible y personal, el dios infinito-finito de la Trinidad— se convirtió en algo cuyo nombre no es posible expresar y cuya imagen es imposible formarse, algo que ha desaparecido dentro de un ser cruel que ya no es estático sino inaccesible.

En la violencia de este cambio total provocado por la radicalización —por la liberación, podría muy bien decirse— de lo lógico, en este desplazamiento del punto de plausibilidad hacia un nuevo estrato del infinito, en este alejarse la fe de la operancia terrenal, es donde resulta abolido aquel ser estático. La fuerza generadora de estilo parece haber sido borrada del espacio terrestre y, junto a la pujanza del edificio kantiano y a las llamas de la Revolución, se eleva, siempre encantador, el rococó, se eleva el estilo Imperio, que de inmediato degenera en el Biedermeier; pues aunque el estilo Imperio y, poco después, el Romanticismo, comprendieran la discrepancia existente entre el cambio radical del espíritu y las formas de expresión terreno-espaciales; aunque su mirada hacia atrás les hiciera invocar el auxilio de los clásicos y del gótico, la evolución no pudo ser detenida. Liberado el ser a una funcionalidad pura, liberada la imagen física del mundo a una abstracción tal que, al cabo de dos generaciones, se vio incluso privada del espacio, la resolución en favor de lo abstracto puro ya estaba tomada. Y así, ante dicho punto infinitamente lejano, punto hacia cuya lejanía inaccesible (y solo aprehensible por el pensamiento) deben tender necesariamente todas las series de preguntas y toda plausibilidad, ante dicho punto resultó imposible unir a un valor central los diferentes ámbitos de valores. La abstracción atraviesa sin compasión la lógica de todas las creaciones de valores, y su despojamiento de contenido prohíbe no solo desviarse de la forma intencional —ya sea la forma intencional de la arquitectura, ya sea la de cualquier otra actividad—, sino que, además, radicaliza hasta tal extremo los distintos ámbitos de los valores, que estos, independizados y elevados hasta lo absoluto, se separan los unos de los otros, se hacen paralelos e, incapaces de formar un cuerpo común, se hacen paritarios; se yerguen unos junto a otros como extraños: el ámbito económico de los valores de «el negocio es el negocio» junto al artístico de «el arte por el arte», el ámbito de los valores militares junto al técnico o al deportivo, autónomos todos ellos, cada uno «para sí», cada uno «liberado» en su autonomía, esforzándose todos y cada uno en sacar las últimas consecuencias y en romper los propios récords. Y cuidado con que, en este antagonismo entre los ámbitos de valores que todavía se mantienen en equilibrio, haya uno que adquiera preponderancia y se alce por encima de todos los demás, como se alza ahora, en la guerra, el militar, o se alza la imagen de un mundo gobernado por la economía, mundo al que incluso la guerra está supeditada, ¡cuidado!, porque ese ámbito de valores cercará el mundo, cercará a todos los demás valores y los exterminará como la plaga de la langosta cuando se abate sobre los campos.

En cuanto al hombre, ese hombre que antaño fue imagen de Dios, espejo de los valores del mundo, de los que él era portador, ese hombre ha dejado de existir; aunque todavía posea reminiscencias de su antigua seguridad, aunque se pregunte qué lógica superior a él ha trastocado su buen sentido, el hombre, impelido hacia el horror de lo infinito, por mucho que se estremezca y, lleno de romanticismo y de sentimentalismo, anhele retornar a la protección de la fe, sigue estando desamparado ante la fuerza de los valores independizados. Y no le queda otro recurso que someterse a cada uno de los valores que se han convertido en su profesión; no le queda otra alternativa que, en función de dichos valores, convertirse en un profesional, devorado por la lógica radical de los valores en cuyas garras ha caído.

XLV

Huguenau tenía acordado con la señora Esch que esta le haría la comida. Era un acuerdo muy práctico, desde cualquier punto de vista, y la señora Esch, hay que reconocerlo, se esforzaba en cumplirlo.

Un día, cuando Huguenau subió a comer, encontró a Esch, sentado junto a la mesa ya dispuesta, sumido en la lectura de un libro forrado de negro. Llevado de la curiosidad, echó una mirada por encima del hombro de Esch y reconoció los grabados de la Biblia. Como raras veces se sorprendía, excepto cuando alguien conseguía pisarle un negocio, cosa que por otra parte sucedía en muy contadas ocasiones, se limitó a exclamar «¡Ah, ya!» y a esperar que sirvieran la comida.

La señora Esch iba y venía; era de anchas caderas y carecía de encanto o atractivo sexual; llevaba el pelo, en cierto modo rubio, recogido, aunque mal, en un moño. Sin embargo, cada vez que pasaba rozaba, sin venir a cuento, la dura espalda de su marido, y Huguenau tuvo de pronto la impresión de que cumplía a la perfección todas las noches con sus deberes conyugales. La idea le resultó desagradable y preguntó:

—¿Qué, Esch, preparándose para entrar en un convento?

Esch levantó la vista del libro:

—La cuestión estriba en si es lícito o no huir —luego, con su habitual grosería, añadió—: pero usted no puede comprenderlo.

La señora Esch trajo la sopa y Huguenau no pudo apartar de su mente aquel desagradable pensamiento. Los dos vivían juntos, como una pareja de amantes, sin hijos, y por ello, a modo de tapadera, querían adoptar a Marguerite. En realidad él estaba sentado en el lugar que correspondía a un hijo. Así pues, con ánimo simplista insistió en la broma de decirle a la señora Esch que su marido iba a encerrarse en un convento. A ello, la señora Esch respondió preguntando si era cierto que, en todos los conventos, los monjes mantenían entre sí relaciones deshonestas. Y, al propio tiempo, se rió de la indecente imagen que pasó por su cabeza. Pero luego se volvió lenta y desconfiada hacia su marido:

—De ti puede esperarse todo.

Evidentemente, el señor Esch se sintió molesto. Huguenau observó que se sonrojaba y que le devolvía a su mujer una mirada iracunda. Pero, llevado por su afán de intentar no perder nunca el control ante la mujer y de crecerse ante ella, Esch especificó que, en último término, todo era cuestión de costumbre y que, por otra parte y como todo el mundo sabía, no era preciso ser marica para llevar una vida monacal, antes bien y en su opinión, incluso con hábito él seguiría siendo muy hombre.

La señora Esch se había puesto seria y muy rígida. Se atusó el pelo maquinalmente y, al fin, dijo:

—¿Está buena, señor Huguenau?

—Exquisita —respondió Huguenau tomando la sopa a grandes cucharadas.

—¿Quiere usted repetir? —dijo la señora Esch suspirando—. De todos modos hoy no tengo mucha cosa más, solo un pastel de maíz.

Cuando Huguenau hizo que le volviera a llenar el plato, aprobó satisfecha. Huguenau, no obstante, seguía con el mismo tema: probablemente el señor Esch estaba harto de menús de guerra; en el convento no habría ni racionamiento de carne ni de harina, allí se vivía aún en la paz más absoluta, cosa nada sorprendente dadas las tierras que poseían los monjes. Allí se llenaba uno el estómago. Cuando estuvo en Maulbronn, un empleado del convento le contó…

Esch le interrumpió: cuando el mundo volviera a ser libre de verdad, no habría que hartarse de comidas penitenciales…

—Berzas y nabos —dijo la señora Esch.

—Hortalizas resecas —dijo Huguenau—. ¿Y a qué llama usted ser libre de verdad?

—A la libertad de un hombre cristiano —dijo Esch.

—Por mí, de acuerdo —dijo Huguenau—. Solo me gustaría saber qué relación tiene eso con las hortalizas resecas.

Esch cogió la Biblia:

—«Mi casa es casa de oración, pero vosotros la habéis convertido en cueva de asesinos.»

—Hum… y los asesinos comen hortalizas resecas —dijo Huguenau con una risita. Luego se puso serio

—: O sea que, según usted, la guerra es una especie de asesinato, en cierto modo un asesinato por robo, como dicen los socialistas.

Esch no le prestaba atención; seguía pasando hojas:

—Y, más adelante, en las Crónicas se dice… Libro segundo… apartado sexto, versículo octavo… Aquí: «Como tu corazón te dice que construyas una casa a mi nombre, has obrado bien al seguir los dictados de tu corazón, pero no eres tú quien ha de construir la casa a mi nombre, sino tu hijo, el que nacerá de tus entrañas». —Esch se puso como la grana—: Esto es muy importante.

—Quizá sí —dijo Huguenau—. ¿Por qué?

—El asesinato acarrea el asesinato… Muchos han de sacrificarse antes de que nazca el Salvador, el hijo que tiene derecho a edificar la casa.

Huguenau preguntó con precaución:

—¿Se refiere usted al Estado del futuro?

—Solo con los sindicatos no puede hacerse nada.

—Vaya, ¿también está eso en el artículo del mayor?

—No, eso está en la Biblia, pero nadie ha sabido leerlo todavía.

Huguenau amonestó a Esch con el dedo:

—Esch, es usted un tipo astuto, pero ¿cree que el viejo, el mayor, no se dará cuenta de los manejos que se trae usted con la Biblia a espaldas suyas?

—¿Qué?

—Pues propaganda comunista.

Esch emitió una risita socarrona mostrando sus dientes amarillos.

—Es usted un idiota.

—Es muy fácil ser un grosero… Y ¿qué quiere usted decir con su Estado del futuro?

Esch reflexionó a fondo:

—¿A usted no hay modo de hacerle comprender nada… Pero tiene que oír una cosa: cuando los hombres sepan de nuevo leer la Biblia, entonces no será necesario el comunismo ni el socialismo… como tampoco habrá una República Francesa o un emperador de Alemania.

—Bien, de acuerdo: tenemos la revolución… Cuénteselo al mayor.

—Estoy dispuesto a contárselo, y con tranquilidad.

—Se alegrará mucho… Y cuando haya usted eliminado al emperador, ¿qué pasará?

—El imperio del Salvador triunfará sobre todos los hombres.

Huguenau guiñó un ojo mirando a la señora Esch:

—¿O sea, el de su hijo?

También Esch miró a su mujer; parecía asustado:

—¿El de mi hijo?

—No tenemos hijos —dijo la señora Esch.

—Usted ha dicho que su hijo construirá la casa —dijo Huguenau con una risita.

Esto ya fue demasiado para Esch:

—Está usted blasfemando… Es usted tan necio que o blasfema o tergiversa las palabras de los demás…

—No tiene tan mala intención —terció conciliadora la señora Esch—; como sigan discutiendo se enfriará la comida.

Esch calló y se dejó servir un pedazo de pastel de maíz.

—No es la primera vez que como con un cura silencioso —dijo Huguenau.

Esch seguía sin decir esta boca es mía, y Huguenau volvió a la carga:

—Bueno, ¿qué pasa con ese reino del Salvador?

La señora Esch los miraba ansiosa:

—Díselo.

—Es un símbolo —refunfuñó Esch.

—Muy interesante —dijo Huguenau—. ¿Y serán los curas quienes…?

—¡Dios Santo!, es preciso que ahora mismo… Bueno, intentar hacerle comprender a usted es desesperante… Jamás ha oído hablar del Reino de la Iglesia, seguro… ¡Y eso pretende ser editor de un periódico!

Ahora fue Huguenau quien se ofendió:

—Parece que su comunismo… si es que parece algo… pretende que todo sea para los curas… Por algo quiere usted meterse en un convento… Para que los curas vivan todavía con mayor opulencia… Para que así a nosotros no nos queden ni las hortalizas resecas… Pretende vaciar en las fauces de una sociedad semejante todo el dinero que nosotros ganamos con el sudor de nuestras frentes… No, prefiero mi negocio honrado a su comunismo.

—Pues, ¡por todos los diablos!, váyase usted a su negocio, pero si no desea aprender nada nuevo, con ideas tan limitadas como las suyas, sí, limitadas he dicho, no se empeñe en publicar un periódico. ¡Son

cosas inconciliables!

A esto Huguenau replicó con aire triunfalista que podían estar más que contentos de haber dado con él; tal y como un tal señor Esch había llevado la sección de anuncios, *El Mensajero* se habría ido a pique en el plazo de un año, como máximo; saltaba a la vista. Y, confiando y dando por sentado que, en terreno práctico como este, ella se pondría de su parte, le guiñó un ojo a la señora Esch. Pero la señora Esch retiraba de la mesa el pastel de maíz la mar de tranquila: una vez más, Huguenau pudo observar que había apoyado su mano en el hombro de su marido; ella no atendía a la conversación, sino que se limitaba a constatar que existían cosas que, tanto usted, mi querido señor Huguenau, como yo, no comprendemos tan fácilmente. Y Esch, levantándose de la mesa apoteósicamente, concluyó la discusión:

—Tiene usted que aprender, jovencito, tiene usted que aprender a abrir los ojos.

Huguenau salió de la habitación. «Parloteo de curas», pensó. «*Haïssez les ennemis de la sainte religion.* Sí, *merde, blagueurs*», él ya estaba dispuesto a odiar, pero no permitía que le ordenaran a quién. *D'ailleurs je m'en fous.* El entrechocar de platos en la fregadera y el olor de la cocina al fregar le acompañaron al bajar la escalera de madera y le recordaron con extraña claridad su casa paterna y a su madre en la cocina.

XLVI

Pocos días después, de la pluma de Huguenau surgió el siguiente escrito:

A la atención del comandante de la plaza,

mayor Joachim von Pasenow.
E/E.

Asunto: Informe confidencial n.° 1

Distinguido señor Mayor:

Refiriéndome respetuosamente a la conversación que tuve el honor de sostener con usted, me permito comunicarle que ayer asistí a una reunión con el señor Esch y con otros individuos. Como es sabido, el señor Esch se reúne más de una vez a la semana en la taberna Zur Pfalz con elementos subversivos y, ayer, me invitó amablemente a acompañarles. Además de un encargado de la fábrica de papel, un tal Liebel, se hallaban también presentes un operario de la citada fábrica, cuyo nombre no pude entender porque fue deliberadamente mal pronunciado, así como dos pensionados del hospital militar que tenían permiso de salida, a saber: un suboficial llamado Bauer y un cañonero de nombre polaco. Un poco más tarde llegó un voluntario de la sección lanzaminas. Se llama Betger o Betzger o algo parecido, y el aludido señor E. se dirigía a él llamándolo «Doctor». Ni siquiera una vez logré desviar la conversación hacia otro tema que no fuera el de la guerra y, sobre todo, se habló del posible final de la misma. El antes citado soldado voluntario manifestó en especial que el asunto se estaba acabando porque los austríacos desmayaban. Al pasar un convoy de tanques, oyó decir que la mayor fábrica de pólvora de Viena había volado por los aires por culpa de los aviadores italianos o de una traición, y que la flota austríaca, tras asesinar a sus oficiales, iba a pasarse al enemigo cuando fue detenida por submarinos alemanes. El cañonero dijo que no podía creerlo, puesto que los marinos alemanes tampoco querían seguir. Cuando le pregunté cómo lo sabía, respondió que se había enterado a través de una chica de la casa de citas de la localidad, chica que había estado con un oficial pagador de la marina que gozaba de permiso. Ella afirma, según el oficial pagador de la marina y según el cañonero, que después de la famosa batalla de Skagerrak, los marineros se negaban a continuar el servicio y que los víveres de la tropa son incomibles. Después de esto, estuvieron todos de acuerdo en que hay que acabar como sea. El encargado subrayó que la guerra solo aportaba beneficios a los grandes capitales y que los rusos habían sido los primeros en darse cuenta de ello. Estas ideas revolucionarias fueron también defendidas por E., quien se apoyó en la Biblia para hacerlo; no obstante, guiado por lo que he experimentado con el señor E., creo poder afirmar con seguridad que sus fines son hipócritas y que los bienes de la iglesia son para él como una espina clavada en el corazón. Evidentemente para ocultar el complot que están tramando, propuso fundar una sociedad bíblica, cosa que provocó las burlas de la mayoría de los presentes. A fin de averiguar, por una parte, más cosas de él y, por otra, también del oficial pagador, sugerí, tras haberse marchado los dos pensionados del hospital y los trabajadores de la fábrica, ir a la casa de citas. Si bien es cierto que pude averiguar algo más del oficial pagador de la marina, el comportamiento del señor E. se me hizo cada vez más sospechoso. El «Doctor», que sin lugar a dudas es un cliente habitual de la casa, me presentó diciendo: «Este señor es del gobierno, deberíais atenderlo gratis», de lo cual deduje que el señor E. abriga algunas sospechas respecto a mí y que había puesto en guardia a sus cómplices. Después de esto, me resultó imposible sacar al señor E. de su reserva; pese a que él había bebido mucho a instancias mías y a mi costa, no hubo manera, a pesar de mi insistencia, de hacerle subir a ningún cuarto, sino que permaneció ostensiblemente sobrio y aprovechó su estado para soltar en el salón ruidosos discursos sobre la falta de cristianismo y sobre el vicio de tales establecimientos. Hasta que el «Doctor», el ya citado voluntario, no aclaró que estas casas son imposición de la administración general por motivos de higiene militar y que, por tanto, deben considerarse como instituciones del ejército, no cedió en su punto contrario a ellas, punto de vista que, de todos modos, volvió a defender en el camino de regreso.

Sin nada más por hoy, me remito a su digna consideración, poniéndome una vez más a su disposición.

Atentamente, Wilhelm Huguenau

P. D. Me permito añadir que, durante la reunión de la taberna Zur Pfalz, el señor Esch aludió a que han sido trasladados a la cárcel de esta localidad uno o más desertores que han de ser fusilados. A continuación, y haciéndose eco de la opinión general, dijo que carece de sentido que ahora, justamente antes del final de la guerra, final que por lo visto esta gente da por descontado, todavía se fusile a los desertores, puesto que de todos modos ya se ha vertido bastante sangre. El señor Esch

opinó que habría que hacer algo al respecto. No aclaró si se refería a una acción violenta o a otro tipo de acción. Quisiera subrayar una vez más que considero al susodicho señor Esch como un lobo con piel de cordero, que oculta, bajo palabras piadosas, la ferocidad de su carácter.

De nuevo me reitero de usted, respetuosamente,

el arriba firmante

Al concluir su informe, Huguenau se miró en el espejo e intentó hacer una mueca de ironía como la que tantas veces le había molestado ver en el señor Esch. Sí, la cartita era una obra maestra; daba gusto enmendarle una vez la plana a Esch. Y esta idea le resultó tan agradable que se imaginó ya la alegría que tendría el mayor cuando recibiera el documento. Pensó en si debía o no llevarlo él personalmente, pero le pareció más aconsejable que el mayor lo recibiera con el correo habitual. Así pues, certificó la carta, no sin antes haber escrito en el sobre y por tres veces, de forma bien destacada: «Personal».

Pero Huguenau se equivocaba; el mayor no se alegró lo más mínimo cuando sobre su mesa, entre los documentos oficiales, halló la carta.

La mañana estaba pesada y tempestuosa, la lluvia azotaba los cristales de la cancillería y el aire olía a ácido sulfuroso o a hollín. En aquella carta se escondía algo feo y violento, algo subterráneo; y aunque el mayor ignoraba —tampoco era propio de su cargo el saberlo— que, cuando alguien intenta ligar su propia realidad a la realidad de los demás y penetrar en ella, siempre se produce brutalidad y violencia, le vino a la mente la palabra «pesadilla» y le pareció que debía protegerse y proteger a su mujer y a sus hijos de algo que no era su mundo sino un estercolero. Dubitativamente, volvió a coger la carta: en el fondo nada se le podía echar en cara a aquel hombre, cuya violencia, por así decirlo, resultaba imperceptible, pues solo se había tomado la libertad de cumplir con un deber de patriota comunicando algo; y el que lo hubiera hecho valiéndose de las repugnantes artimañas de un agente provocador era algo que no podía reprochársele a un hombre inculto. Pero precisamente porque todo ello resultaba en realidad incomprensible, el mayor solo experimentó humillación —había depositado su confianza en un hombre de talento y de condición inferiores— y su rostro, enmarcado por blancos cabellos, enrojeció más aún debido a la vergüenza. No obstante, el comandante de la plaza comprendió que, en justicia, no tenía derecho a depositar pura y simplemente el documento en la papelera, ya que, por su cargo, estaba obligado a observar a partir de aquel momento al sospechoso, a seguirle en cierto modo de lejos, a fin de evitar que, por culpa del señor Esch, la patria pudiera un día verse tal vez amenazada por una desgracia.

XLVII

El médico jefe de Estado Mayor doctor Kuhlenbeck hablaba por teléfono con el doctor Kessel:

—Querido colega, ¿podría usted venir a operar hoy a las tres?, se trata de la simple extracción de una bala…

El doctor Kessel dijo que le sería muy difícil, pues disponía de muy poco tiempo.

—Sin duda extraer una bala es algo demasiado sencillo para usted, como para mí… pero hay que resignarse… Ni esto es vida ni es trabajo, y a la larga también yo acabaré por pedir que me sustituyan… pero hoy no sirve de nada… Le ordeno que venga, le envío el coche, en media hora habremos terminado.

Kuhlenbeck colgó el auricular. Rió:

—Bueno, estará ocupado un par de horas.

Flurschütz estaba sentado a su lado:

—Me ha sorprendido que haga usted venir a Kessel por una pequeñez como esta.

—El bueno de Kessel siempre se lleva un chasco conmigo. De paso operaremos el apéndice de Kneese.

—¿Está realmente decidido a operarle?

—¿Y por qué no? Ese hombre merece una satisfacción… y yo también.

—¿Él quiere que le operen?

—Flurschütz, ahora resulta usted tan ingenuo como nuestro viejo Kessel. ¿Acaso se lo he preguntado alguna vez? Después todos me lo han agradecido. Además, ¿y el permiso de cuatro semanas que les consigo por estar enfermos…? ¿Se da cuenta?

Flurschütz quiso decir algo. Kuhlenbeck no le dejó:

—¡Bah!, déjeme tranquilo con su teoría de las secreciones… Querido amigo mío, cuando puedo echar un vistazo al interior de un vientre no necesito teorías… Hágame caso, y llegará usted a ser un cirujano… Es la única posibilidad de mantenerse joven.

—¿Y debo abandonar mis trabajos sobre las glándulas?

—Abandónelos con toda tranquilidad… ¡pero si opera usted muy bien!

—Hay que hacer algo con Jaretzki, doctor… El pobre está acabado.

—Probemos a hacerle una trepanación.

—Usted ya le ha dado de alta… Necesita un tratamiento especial para los nervios.

—Lo traslado a Kreuznach, allí se recuperará… ¡Vaya generación la de ustedes! Beben un poco y se desmoronan y enseguida necesitan un sanatorio neurológico… ¡Ordenanza!

El ordenanza apareció en el marco de la puerta.

—Dígale a la enfermera Carla que operaremos a las tres… ¡Ah!, y que a Marwitz, de la habitación dos, y Kneese, de la tres, no les dé hoy de comer… Nada más… Dígame, Flurschütz, en realidad no necesitamos al pobre Kessel, nosotros solos nos arreglaríamos perfectamente… De todos modos, Kessel no le da a esto ninguna importancia, solo sabe quejarse de que le duelen las piernas; es un auténtico sadismo por mi parte obligarle a venir corriendo… Bueno, ¿qué opina usted, Flurschütz?

—Con su permiso, doctor, le diré que conmigo todavía puede pasar, pero esto no durará mucho tiempo… Y entonces ya no será posible separar la medicina de la cirugía, sin más ni más…

—¿Insubordinación, Flurschütz?

—Mera teoría, doctor… No, creo que dentro de un tiempo no muy lejano la medicina habrá desarrollado tanto sus distintas especialidades que una consulta entre un internista y un cirujano o un dermatólogo no conducirá a nada positivo, porque simplemente ya no habrá ninguna posibilidad de comprensión entre las especialidades.

—Eso es falso, absolutamente falso, Flurschütz: dentro de muy poco solo habrá cirujanos… Es lo único que quedará de esta paupérrima medicina… El hombre es un matarife y seguirá siendo un matarife… De otra cosa no entiende, pero de eso, ya lo creo que entiende; es un experto.

Y el doctor Kuhlenbeck observó sus anchas, peludas y habilísimas manos, y sus uñas cortadas al ras.

Luego, dijo pensativo:

—¿Sabe?, el que no se adapte a estos hechos puede volverse loco de verdad… Hay que aceptar las cosas como son y buscarles la parte alegre… Vamos, Flurschütz, acepte usted un consejo: cambie de montura y hágase cirujano.

XLVIII

Había que batallar para recibir cada bobina de papel y, aunque Esch poseyera un cupo oficial para *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*, todas las semanas tenía que ir a la fábrica de papel. Y casi siempre se producía un altercado con el viejo señor Keller o con el director de la fábrica.

Acababan de cerrar cuando Esch salió de la fábrica. En la calle recogió al encargado Liebel y al maquinista Fendrich. En realidad no soportaba a Liebel, con su rubia cabeza en forma de torreón y su gordísima vena en la frente. Dijo:

—Buenas.

—Buenas, Esch, ¿ha rezado usted concienzudamente con el viejo?

Esch no comprendía.

—¡Para que le envíe el papel!

—Una broma estúpida —dijo Esch.

Fendrich se detuvo y señaló las agujereadas suelas de sus zapatos:

—Esto cuesta seis marcos… Es lo que se gana con el aumento de salarios.

Para Esch era un punto de partida:

—Con los salarios solos no se hace nada, ese es el error de todos los sindicatos.

—¿Qué me dice, Esch, también quiere usted remendar las botinas de Fendrich con la Biblia? —Y cayó en la cuenta—: Botinas y Biblia riman.[2]

—Una broma estúpida —repitió Esch.

Los ojos de Fendrich, hundidos y oscuros, brillaban febriles; estaba tuberculoso y no le suministraban leche suficiente. Dijo:

—Tal vez la fe sea también un lujo que solo los ricos pueden permitirse.

—Los comandantes y los editores de periódicos —dijo Liebel.

—En el periódico yo también soy un simple empleado —dijo Esch, como excusándose, pero luego añadió—: Todo esto es una solemne idiotez. ¡Como si los sindicatos hubieran hecho voto de pobreza!

—Sería muy bonito poder tener fe —dijo Fendrich.

—He descubierto algo: también la fe debe renovarse, también para la fe ha de venir una vida nueva… La Biblia dice que solo el hijo tendrá derecho a construir la casa.

—Naturalmente —dijo Liebel—, que la generación futura lo tendrá más fácil no es nada nuevo… Yo no puedo vivir con mis ciento cuarenta marcos, ni siquiera incluyendo las primas de producción… Esto el viejo lo ve… Y eso que yo soy, por así decirlo, maestro.

—Yo tampoco tengo nada más —dijo Esch—, ni siquiera contando la casa… Tengo dos inquilinos a los que, honestamente, no puedo cobrarles un alquiler, son unos pobres diablos… La cuenta del edificio me da

un saldo negativo…

El viento, conforme declinaba el día, era más fresco. Fendrich tosió.

Liebel dijo:

—Bueno, bueno.

—Fui a casa del párroco… —apuntó Esch.

—¿Para qué?

—Pues por ese pasaje de la Biblia. Y el idiota ni me escuchó. Dijo cuatro tonterías sobre la oración y la Iglesia y eso fue todo. Ese cura idiota… Uno tiene que ayudarse a sí mismo.

—Sí, nadie le ayuda a uno —dijo Fendrich.

—Cuando la gente está unida —dijo Liebel—, los unos se ayudan a los otros… Esa es la ventaja de los sindicatos.

El médico dice que debería irme a la montaña, ya se lo ha comunicado diez veces al seguro de enfermedad… pero si no vienes del frente, has de esperar. Yo cada día toso más.

Esch adoptó aquella expresión irónica tan suya:

—Con los sindicatos y el seguro de enfermedad no logrará usted mucho más de lo que yo he logrado con el cura…

—Uno ha de reventar solo —dijo Fendrich tosiendo.

—¿Qué quiere usted en realidad? —preguntó Liebel.

Esch reflexionó:

—Antes creía que había que huir, simplemente… a América… en un gran barco, cruzando un ancho mar… para poder empezar una nueva vida… pero ahora…

Liebel esperaba la continuación:

—Ahora ¿qué?

—Tal vez los protestantes lo tengan mejor… —dijo Esch sin transición—. El mayor también es protestante… pero primero hay que reflexionar… Habría que reunirse y sentarse a leer juntos la Biblia para poder hacerse una idea… Cuando estás solo, las dudas no te dejan, por mucho que reflexiones…

—Si se tienen amigos, todo es más fácil —dijo Fendrich.

—Venga a mi casa —dijo Esch—, le enseñaré ese pasaje de la Biblia.

—Bueno —dijo Fendrich.

—¿Y usted, Liebel? —preguntó Esch por cumplido.

—Primero tendrán que contarme lo que hayan elucubrado juntos.

Fendrich suspiró:

—Cada uno ve las cosas con sus propios ojos y nada más.

Liebel se alejó riendo.

—Acabará viniendo él también —dijo Esch.

XLIX

Historia de la joven salutista de Berlín 7

No me acuerdo muy bien de la noche en que acompañé a Nuchem Sussin al Ejército de Salvación. Me preocupaban cosas más importantes. Piénsese lo que se piense de la actividad filosófica, comparado con ella el mundo exterior seguirá siendo cada vez menos digno de atención y más insignificante. Y, por otra parte, las cosas más dignas de atención resultan también insignificantes mientras las vivimos. En resumen, lo único que recuerdo aún es a Nuchem Sussin caminando junto a mí con su levita gris abotonada, sus pantalones excesivamente cortos —y, por eso mismo, ondeantes al viento— y su ridículo y pequeñísimo sombrero de fieltro gris. Todos estos judíos, en cuanto no van provistos de sus gorras negras, se ponen uno de esos sombreros de fieltro demasiado pequeños, incluso el propio doctor Litwak, quien, por así decirlo, iba a la moda. No pude dominarme y le pregunté un tanto brutalmente de dónde lo había sacado.

—Se reciben —dijo por toda respuesta.

Por otra parte, estos son detalles que ni siquiera merecen ser mencionados. Solo adquirieron alguna importancia ayer, cuando el doctor Litwak vino a verme; tiene la desagradable costumbre de entrar sin previo aviso; durante mi llamada enfermedad también lo hacía. Así pues, se plantó ante mí una vez más, mientras yo estaba echado en el sofá. En la mano llevaba su inseparable bastón y en la cabeza aquel ridículo y pequeño sombrero de fieltro; es decir, el sombrero no era tan pequeño, sino más bien ancho, pero lo llevaba tan echado hacia atrás que apenas le cubría la parte superior de la cabeza. Se me ocurrió que, de joven, también el doctor Litwak tenía que haber sido de tez lechosa. Ahora, en cambio, tenía el color de la nata rancia.

—Podrá usted decirme qué pasa con Sussin.

Como era verdad, le dije:

—Es amigo mío.

—Amigo suyo… Bien… —Acercó una silla—: Esta gente está preocupada… Me han hecho llamar, ¿comprende?

En el fondo, yo no tenía obligación ninguna de comprenderlo, pero quería abreviar la escena:

—Tiene derecho a ir donde quiera.

—Vaya, vaya, ¿quién tiene derecho, quién no tiene derecho…? Yo no le reprocho a usted nada, pero… ¿qué hace Sussin por ahí con esa cristiana?

Hasta entonces no me acordé de que aquella noche había traído a Marie y a Nuchem a mi habitación. Cuando no se tiene dinero es imposible ir de tabernas.

No pude contener la risa.

—Usted se ríe y su mujer está allí, sentada, llorando.

Aquello era una novedad, desde luego; claro está que yo podía saber que los judíos se casan a los quince años. ¡Si al menos supiera quién era la mujer de Sussin! ¿Sería una de las muchachas vestidas a la moda? ¿O una de las matronas con moño? Esto último me pareció lo más creíble.

Cogí al doctor Litwak por el cordón de sus quevedos:

—¿También tiene hijos?

—¿Qué quiere que tenga? ¿Gatos?

El doctor Litwak adoptó una expresión tan orgullosa que no tuve más remedio que preguntarle su nombre de pila.

—Doctor Simson Litwak —dijo, volviendo a presentarse.

—Muy bien, doctor Simson, dígame usted, ¿qué quiere en realidad de mí?

Reflexionó un momento:

—Yo soy un hombre liberal… pero hay cosas que pasan de la raya… Debe usted disuadirle.

—¿De qué debo disuadirle? ¿De que quiera ir a Sión? No le prive de placer tan inofensivo.

—Quiere hacerse bautizar… Ha de disuadirle usted.

—Que vaya a Jerusalén como judío o como cristiano, ¿qué más da?

—Jerusalén —repitió haciéndosele la boca agua.

—Entonces, ¿qué? —dije con la esperanza de que se fuera.

Era evidente que seguía saciándose con la palabra «Jerusalén»:

—Yo soy un hombre liberal… Pero con tanto cántico absurdo y tanta palabrería nadie ha conseguido llegar hasta allí… Para eso hace falta gente de otro tipo… Yo soy médico y he de visitarlos a todos, a mí poco puede importarme que la gente sea judía o cristiana… En todas partes hay personas excelentes… ¿Le disuadirá usted?

Su insistencia me puso frenético:

—Yo soy un gran antisemita —él sonrió con incredulidad—, soy agente del Ejército de Salvación y una gran autoridad en Jerusalén…

—Es broma —dijo divertido, aunque saltaba a la vista que se sentía molesto—, es una broma.

Tenía razón: bromeaba; y, dicho sea de paso, esa era la actitud que yo había adoptado frente a la vida, la actitud en que había ido a dar. ¿Quién era el responsable? ¿La guerra?

No lo sabía, ni probablemente lo sé hoy todavía, pese a lo mucho que desde entonces han cambiado las cosas.

Yo seguía reteniendo al doctor Litwak por el cordón de sus quevedos. Él dijo:

—Pero usted, también usted, es un hombre liberal…

—Sí, ¿y qué?

—¿Por qué no deja a la gente con sus… —le costó llegar a pronunciar la palabra—… prejuicios?

—¡Con que a eso le llama usted prejuicios!

Quedó totalmente confuso:

—En realidad, no son prejuicios… ¿Qué son los prejuicios en realidad? —Y por último, ya tranquilo, añadió—: Realmente, no son prejuicios.

En cuanto se fue, comencé a pensar en la noche que había estado con los salutistas. Tal y como he dicho antes, para mí transcurrió del modo más anodino. De vez en cuando observaba a Nuchem Sussin que, allí sentado, escuchaba los cánticos con una sonrisa algo distante en sus arqueados labios de judío, que destacaban en su rostro lechoso. Y luego me los traje a los dos conmigo —mejor dicho, me traje a Marie, puesto que, de todos modos, Nuchem vivía aquí— y, bueno, pues se sentaron en mi cuarto y estuvieron callados dejando que yo hablara, hasta que Nuchem señaló como otras veces el laúd, y dijo:

—Toque usted.

Entonces, Marie cogió el laúd y cantó la canción que dice: «Ya cruzaba por las puertas de Sión hacia delante / un ejército lavado en la sangre del Cordero / y en sus filas hay un sitio reservado para ti». Y Nuchem escuchaba con una sonrisa algo distante.

L

Huguenau esperó durante ocho días recibir algún elogio o por lo menos una respuesta del mayor. Esperó diez días. Y empezó a intranquilizarse. Evidentemente el informe no había sido del agrado del mayor. Pero ¿tenía él la culpa de que Esch, el muy cretino, no le ofreciera material? Huguenau pensó si debía o no enviar un segundo informe, pero ¿qué podía poner en él? Que Esch seguía ocupándose, como siempre, de los campesinos vinateros y de los trabajadores no era nada nuevo, ¡y aburriría al mayor!

El mayor no debía aburrirse, y Huguenau se devanaba los sesos pensando qué podría ofrecerle. Era preciso que sucediera algo; la redacción estaba en poder de Esch y este actuaba como si no existiera ningún editor, y en la imprenta reinaba tal aburrimiento que apenas si podía soportarse. Huguenau buscó inspiración en los periódicos importantes y la halló al descubrir que todos ellos trabajan para la beneficencia patriótica, mientras que *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* no había hecho nada en absoluto en este sentido. ¡Así era el buen corazón de Esch, aquel corazón que no podía soportar la miseria de los campesinos vinateros! Pero él ya sabía ahora, personalmente, lo que había que hacer.

El viernes por la noche, tras muchos días de ausencia, se presentó de nuevo en la hospedería y se encaminó directamente a la sala donde se reunían las personalidades del lugar, puesto que él era una de ellas. El mayor estaba sentado a su mesa de siempre en el comedor de junto a la entrada. Huguenau le saludó breve y comedidamente al pasar.

Por fortuna, los caballeros se hallaban reunidos ya en gran número y Huguenau manifestó que sentía sumo placer en encontrarles, ya que, antes de que entrara el mayor, tenía que exponerles algo importante. Y pronunció un largo discurso diciendo que la ciudad adolecía, lo cual era muy de lamentar, de algo como una auténtica asociación benéfica semejante a las que, desde hacía años, existían en todas partes a fin de paliar los daños causados por la guerra, y que él proponía fundar inmediatamente una asociación parecida. Entre los fines de dicha asociación se limitaba a mencionar el mantenimiento de las tumbas de los combatientes, el socorro a viudas y huérfanos de guerra y muchas cosas más; y siguió diciendo que, a fin de conseguir medios para estos objetivos, era preciso, por ejemplo, colocar en el mercado un «Bismark de hierro», a fin de cubrirlo de clavos, a diez pfennigs el clavo; por cierto, que era una vergüenza que aquí no existiera ya alguna de esas figuras, y por último añadió que, independientemente de lo que se recaudara, manifestaciones benéficas de todo tipo completarían las cuentas de la caja. Y que la presidencia honorífica de dicha asociación, para la cual él proponía el nombre de Gratitud Moselana, debía ser ofrecida al comandante de la plaza. Él en persona y su *Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* se ponían en todo momento y gratuitamente a disposición —en la medida de sus débiles fuerzas, como era natural— de

la citada asociación y de sus nobles fines.

Ni que decir tiene que el proyecto halló aprobación unánime y que fue aceptado por todos sin la menor discusión. Huguenau y el farmacéutico Paulsen fueron designados para proponer la idea al mayor y, tras abotonarse bien las chaquetas, penetraron en el comedor con cierta solemnidad.

El mayor les miró un tanto extrañado, después se echó un poco hacia atrás con un gesto militar típico y, aunque sin comprender nada, escuchó con atención cuanto decían los caballeros. Las frases se entrecruzaban y se repetían, el mayor oyó que le hablaban de un «Bismark de hierro», de viudas de guerra y de una «Gratitud Moselana», pero no comprendió nada. Finalmente, Huguenau tuvo la vista suficiente como para ceder la palabra al farmacéutico Paulsen; además, le pareció más oportuno hacerlo así y quedarse, pues, sentado y en silencio, contemplando el reloj de la pared, el cuadro *El príncipe heredero Friedrich después de la batalla de Gravelotte* y el cartel de la cerveza Spatenbräu (con su pala), que colgaba junto al cuadro del príncipe heredero. ¡Dónde encontrar ahora cerveza Spatenbräu! Entretanto, el mayor había comprendido el discurso del farmacéutico Paulsen: creía que no había razón alguna de tipo militar que se opusiera a la aceptación de la dirección honorífica; él, además, encomiaba aquel gesto patriótico, solo podía agradecerlo con el más vivo entusiasmo, y se levantó para ir a darles también las gracias a los caballeros de la sala contigua. Huguenau y Paulsen le siguieron muy satisfechos del éxito de su misión.

Permanecieron reunidos bastante tiempo, pues en cierto modo aquella era una fiesta fundacional. Huguenau buscaba la oportunidad de acercarse al mayor, y la ocasión se presentó al brindar por el éxito de la nueva asociación y a la salud de su protector, sin olvidar al promotor de tan feliz idea, es decir, al señor Huguenau, redactor.

Huguenau, vaso en mano, dio la vuelta en torno a la mesa hasta situarse junto al mayor:

—Confío en que hoy mi comandante estará contento de mí.

El Comandante respondió que nunca había tenido motivos para no estarlo.

—Claro que sí, mi Comandante, mi informe resultaba sumamente incompleto… Pero le ruego que me conceda el favor de considerar lo dificilísimo de la situación. Además, a esto hay que sumar mi exceso de trabajo reorganizando el periódico; si hasta ahora no me ha sido posible redactar un nuevo informe, le pido, por favor, que no lo juzgue como negligencia en el cumplimiento del deber…

El mayor no le dejó continuar:

—Opino que no vale la pena seguir con este asunto; usted ya ha cumplido de sobra con su deber.

A Huguenau esto le desconcertó:

—¡Oh, no!, en absoluto… —murmuró, y se hizo el firme propósito de continuar su labor de vigilancia.

Como el mayor no añadiera ningún comentario más, Huguenau prosiguió:

—Mañana mismo imprimiremos las proclamas anunciando Gratitud Moselana… ¿No se dignará el mayor honrar con su visita nuestra empresa en tal ocasión, ya que tan benévolamente se ha brindado a patrocinarla…? Esta sería la mejor propaganda para la nueva asociación, seguro.

El mayor dijo que desde luego visitaría la empresa con sumo gusto; el día siguiente lo tenía completamente ocupado, pero el día era lo de menos.

—Cuanto antes, mejor —se arriesgó a decir Huguenau—. Mi comandante no hallará en ella nada de especial interés… todo es muy humilde… y, como es natural, a simple vista no se nota el proceso de reorganización, pero la imprenta funciona a la perfección, dicho sea con toda modestia… —De pronto se le ocurrió otra idea—: La imprenta, por ejemplo, sería muy apropiada para la publicación de documentos de la administración militar…

Iba caldeándose; con sumo gusto habría cogido al mayor por un botón de su chaqueta:

—Vea usted, mi comandante, vea cómo ha descuidado Esch el negocio… Tenía que venir yo para pensar en ello… Tenemos que recibir encargos del ejército, tanto más ahora que, por así decirlo, el periódico se halla bajo la directa protección de usted… ¿Cómo, si no, voy a conseguir dividendos para los accionistas…? ¡En el estado en que yo he encontrado el negocio!

Casi gemía y estaba irritado de verdad.

El mayor, un tanto desconcertado, dijo:

—Esto no es de mi incumbencia…

—Cierto, cierto, mi comandante, pero si mi comandante quisiera, en serio… Cuando mi comandante haya visto la imprenta, seguro que querrá…

Miraba al mayor con aires de seducción y embeleso, pero al mismo tiempo con desespero. Enseguida recobró el dominio de sí mismo, limpió los cristales de sus gafas, miró a su alrededor y dijo:

—Lo digo también en beneficio de los caballeros todos aquí presentes y que participan… Por supuesto todos los caballeros están invitados a visitar la empresa.

La mayoría conocía ya la barraca de Esch. Pero nadie lo dijo.

Hacía más de tres semanas que Heinrich Wendling había anunciado su permiso. Y aunque por las mañanas Hanna seguía permaneciendo mucho rato en la cama, apenas si creía ya que Heinrich vendría realmente. Pero un día apareció de pronto, no por la mañana ni por la tarde, sino a la plena luz del mediodía. Había pasado la mitad de la noche en la estación de Coblenza, y luego había venido, con enorme lentitud, en un tren militar. Mientras él le contaba todo esto, estaban de pie, uno frente a otro, en el empedrado camino del jardín. El sol del mediodía calentaba mucho, en mitad del césped destacaba la sombrilla roja junto a la tumbona donde ella había estado echada, olía a algodón rojo calentado al sol, y la suave brisa del mediodía movía las hojas del libro abandonado. El recién llegado al hogar no la tocó en absoluto, ni siquiera le tendió la mano, solo la miraba, fijamente, sin apartar la vista de su rostro, y ella, sabiendo que él tenía que buscar la imagen que de ella llevaba consigo desde hacía dos años, se mantenía inmóvil bajo aquella mirada escrutadora; también ella contemplaba aquel rostro inclinado hacia el suyo, no buscando, evidentemente, imagen alguna que la hubiera acompañado, puesto que en ella no existía ya ninguna imagen, sino buscando los rasgos que en determinada ocasión la habían impulsado a amar aquel rostro, rostro que ahora le parecía extrañamente igual que antes; conocía y reconocía la línea de los labios, la colocación y la forma de los dientes, el surco de encima del mentón seguía siendo el mismo y, junto al nacimiento de la nariz, el espacio entre los ojos resultaba un poco demasiado grande, debido a la anchura del cráneo.

—He de ver tu perfil —dijo ella.

Y él, obediente, volvió la cabeza. Ahí estaba de nuevo la misma nariz rectilínea dibujándose por encima del labio superior, únicamente había desaparecido todo rastro de blandura. En realidad, había que reconocer que era un hombre guapo; sin embargo, ella no le encontraba ahora aquel algo que antaño la había cautivado y atraído.

—¿Dónde está el chico? —preguntó Heinrich.

—En la escuela… ¿No quieres entrar?

Y entraron en la casa. Pero tampoco ahora la tocó ni la besó, solo la miraba.

—Ante todo, he de lavarme… La última vez que me bañé fue en Viena.

—Sí, vamos a preparar un baño.

Las dos criadas vinieron a saludar al amo, cosa que a Hanna no le resultó del todo agradable. Subió con él al cuarto de baño. Ella misma preparó las toallas.

—Todo está como estaba, Heinrich.

—¡Oh, sí!, todo está como estaba.

Ella salió del cuarto de baño; había montañas de cosas que organizar; lo hizo cansadamente.

Cortó rosas en el jardín para la mesa del comedor.

Al cabo de un rato regresó al cuarto de baño sin hacer ruido y le oyó dentro, chapoteando. Notó que le estaba comenzando en la nuca el dolor de cabeza. Bajó de nuevo al vestíbulo apoyándose en la barandilla.

Finalmente, el chico llegó de la escuela. Lo cogió de la mano. Se detuvo ante la puerta del baño y preguntó:

—¿Se puede entrar ya?

—Naturalmente —fue la un tanto sorprendida respuesta.

Ella abrió un poco la puerta y miró. Heinrich, a medio vestir, estaba de pie frente al espejo. Ella puso en la abierta mano del chico una rosa, le obligó a cerrar el puño para sostenerla, lo empujó hacia dentro y se alejó.

Los esperó en el comedor y, cuando aparecieron, tuvo que apartar la mirada. Se parecían ridículamente: los mismos ojos rasgados y muy separados, iguales movimientos, idéntico pelo castaño, solo que ahora Heinrich lo llevaba muy corto. Se diría que ella no tenía parte alguna en el niño. Era un mecanismo espantoso; ¡oh!, era espantoso haber sido amada. Y en ese momento, su vida se le apareció como un acto único de enajenación mental, una desesperada enajenación que jamás podría detenerse.

—Otra vez en casa —dijo Heinrich.

Y se sentó en su sitio de costumbre. Tal vez su observación le pareció tonta a él mismo; sonreía inseguro. El chico le observaba con atención y extrañeza.

Estaba sentado allí, como un padre de familia, y solo era un aguafiestas.

Tampoco la criada podía apartar sus miradas de él; en su expresión había algo de tímida admiración y de envidia. Cuando la criada volvió a entrar, Hanna dijo en tono muy alto:

—¿Telefoneo a Röders… para esta noche?

El abogado Röders era el colega de Wendling; pasaba de la cincuentena y estaba exento del servicio militar.

En su caja de caoba inglesa, el reloj dejó sonar un gong profundo. Hanna rozó con el dedo meñique el borde de la mano de él, como para pedirle, con este gesto cariñoso, perdón por haber propuesto reunirse con Röders, pero también para advertirle que deseaba evitar todo contacto físico.

—Naturalmente, tendré que llamar a Röders… —dijo Heinrich—. Enseguida me ocuparé de eso.

—Después de comer, saldremos de paseo con papá, para que nos vean.

—Sí, desde luego —dijo Heinrich.

—¿No es estupendo que papá esté de nuevo con nosotros?

—Sí —contestó el niño tras una vacilación.

—Tienes que ver sus cuadernos escolares… Ahora ya sabe escribir y hacer cuentas. Las cartas te las escribió él solo.

—Eran unas cartas estupendas, Walter.

—Eran cartas y nada más —dijo Walter con timidez.

A ambos les parecía una especie de abuso colocar al niño entre los dos para encontrarse por encima de su cabecita castaña. Desde luego hubiera sido mucho más justo decir: no nos besemos hasta que nuestra añoranza llegue a ser insoportable, pero esa añoranza no era tal añoranza, solo era una espera insoportable.

Fueron al cuarto del niño en cuyo arrimadero habían pintado lo que suele llamarse un alegre friso infantil. Y con aquella segunda inteligencia, lúcida y algo desplazada, que suele surgir ante una esperanza excesiva o a consecuencia de un lacerante dolor de cabeza, Hanna supo que los muebles lacados y toda aquella blancura eran también un abuso para con el niño; supo que aquello no tenía nada que ver con la persona o la existencia del niño, sino que allí se había construido un símbolo, un símbolo de los blancos pechos de ella y de la blanca leche que debían producir tras una lograda entrega. Se llevó las manos a la nuca; le dolía. Era un pensamiento remoto y muy confuso, pero en él se escondía la razón por la cual nunca le había gustado estar en la habitación del niño, sino que siempre había preferido que el chico fuera a la suya.

—También tienes que enseñarle a papá tus nuevos juguetes —dijo.

Walter trajo su nueva caja de construcción y los soldados vestidos de un gris verdoso. Había veintitrés soldados y un oficial, el cual, rodilla en tierra, apuntaba al enemigo con su sable desenvainado. Ninguno de los tres se dio cuenta de que el doctor Wendling también vestía un uniforme de color gris verdoso, claro está que cada uno de ellos tenía sus motivos para no darse cuenta: Walter porque en su padre veía a un intruso, Heinrich porque era incapaz de identificar el heroico gesto del soldadito de plomo con su propia guerra, y Hanna porque, con gran estupefacción y miedo por su parte, veía a este hombre desnudo ante ella, desnudo y aislado en su desnudez. Su aislamiento era semejante al de los muebles, que la rodeaban como desnudos, desligados de su entorno, sin relación entre ellos, extraños y distantes.

Él tenía que sentir lo mismo. Y cuando salieron de paseo, pusieron al niño en medio; aquello era una separación, aunque Hanna, moviendo alegremente el brazo, llevara al niño de la mano, y aunque Heinrich también cogiera a menudo la otra mano del niño. No se miraban, se sentían como avergonzados, iban con la mirada fija delante de ellos o puesta en los prados donde, entre la hierba, crecían dientes de león, tréboles violeta, claveles silvestres y escabiosas de color lila. Era un día cálido y Hanna no estaba acostumbrada a pasear por la tarde. Sin embargo, el hecho de que ella, al regresar, sintiera la imperiosa necesidad de tomar un baño, no se debía solo al calor. Curiosamente, todos los deseos se depositaban ahora en un estrato más profundo: como si el agua que rodea el cuerpo sumergido fuera una enorme soledad, sus deseos actuales se nutrían de las ideas de reencarnación mágica que, por mediación del agua, acuden a la mente del ser solitario; por supuesto, mucho más definida que todas estas ideas era la vergüenza que sentía el pensar que por la noche tendría que utilizar el cuarto de baño en presencia de Heinrich. No obstante, como a la criada le habría extrañado que ella tomara un baño en pleno día, pretextando que tenía que cambiarse para la noche, rogó a Heinrich que mientras tanto pidiera un coche y cuidara de Walter. Entonces se encaminó al cuarto de aseo para darse, al menos, una ducha. Pero en cuanto se metió en la bañera, donde todavía quedaban gotas del baño de por la mañana, así como también en la alcachofa de la ducha, las rodillas le flaquearon y necesitó dejar que el agua fría corriera por su cuerpo hasta que la piel quedó como de hielo y los pechos se le endurecieron como piedras. Después se sintió mejor.

Fueron tarde a casa de Röders. Heinrich despidió el coche; hacía una noche muy hermosa y Hanna se lo agradeció y estuvo totalmente de acuerdo en regresar a pie (cuanto más tarde fuera, mejor). Y debía de ser más de medianoche cuando salieron de casa de Röders. Pero cuando atravesaron la plaza del Mercado, donde no se veía a nadie exceptuando al centinela de guardia frente a la comandancia, cuando aquella plaza, con sus oscuros edificios y apenas iluminada, se desplegó ante ellos como un cráter de soledad, como un cráter del que fluyeran las olas de silencio que envolvían a la ciudad dormida, Heinrich Wendling cogió a su mujer del brazo, y ella, al sentir este primer contacto de sus cuerpos, cerró los ojos. Quizá también él había cerrado los ojos y no veía el pesado cielo nocturno de verano ni la blanca franja de la calle que se extendía ante ellos y cuyo polvo pisaban al andar; tal vez cada uno de ellos veía un firmamento distinto, porque los dos se hallaban cerrados, como sus ojos, al mundo exterior, encerrados cada uno en su soledad, unidos solamente por el mutuo reconocerse de sus cuerpos que, al fin, se unieron en un beso, sin rebozo, lascivos ante la evidencia del sexo, pero castos por el dolor de un distanciamiento

que jamás ternura alguna podría abolir.

LII

Después del entierro de Samwald, el bueno de Gödicke empezó a hablar.

El voluntario Samwald era hermano del relojero Friedrich Samwald, relojero cuya tienda estaba en la calle Römer. Tras un fuego graneado seguido de un asalto, el joven Samwald comenzó a toser de repente y cayó en un absoluto agotamiento. Era un muchacho de diecinueve años, simpático, valiente, querido de todos, y por ello consiguió que lo enviaran al hospital militar de su ciudad natal. Ni siquiera llegó en un transporte de enfermos, sino que llegó solo, como si estuviera de permiso, y el médico jefe de Estado Mayor dijo:

—Bueno, muchacho, a ti te pondremos bien enseguida.

Y aunque el doctor Kessel se ocupó también y mucho de Samwald, y este parecía ya completamente curado, tuvo de repente otro vómito de sangre y a los tres días yacía muerto, arrebatado a la vida. A pesar de que el sol reía desde el cielo.

Como era un hospital en el que solo se atendían casos benignos, la muerte no se mantenía en secreto, como en los grandes hospitales; al contrario, se convertía en todo un acontecimiento. Antes de trasladarlo al cementerio, colocaron el féretro ante la puerta principal del hospital, donde se celebró la ceremonia religiosa. Los enfermos que podían levantarse se pusieron las chaquetas del uniforme y formaron en filas, y también acudió mucha gente de la ciudad. El médico jefe de Estado Mayor pronunció un discurso exaltando a los héroes, el párroco permaneció de pie ante el féretro, y un muchacho con sotana roja y sobrepelliz blanco sostuvo el incensario. Después las mujeres, así como algunos hombres, se arrodillaron y se rezó de nuevo el rosario.

Gödicke se había quedado en el jardín. Cuando se dio cuenta de la aglomeración, se acercó apoyándose en sus bastones y se unió a los demás. Lo que allí estaba sucediendo era una visión muy familiar, por ello tenía que apartarla de sí. Reflexionó; quería destruir lo que veía, hacerlo trizas como si fuera un trozo de papel o de cartón (por eso tenía que pensarlo con mucho cuidado, con suma atención). Cuando las mujeres se arrodillaron produciendo un ruido sordo semejante al que hacían las mujeres de la limpieza, la risa le subió a la garganta, pero le estaba prohibido emitir ningún sonido. Allí estaba él, de pie, en medio de las mujeres arrodilladas, apoyado en los bastones, como si fuera un andamio, y afianzó los pilares en la tierra y ahogó el sonido en su garganta. Pero cuando las mujeres, concluido el padrenuestro y las tres avemarías, dijeron «descendió a los infiernos y al tercer día resucitó de entre los muertos», fue como si en la plataforma más baja del andamio, encima del dolorido y contraído vientre, surgiendo como de un ventrílocuo que él había oído una vez, se formaran palabras y, en lugar de ladrar, dijo, tal vez imperceptiblemente —tan adentro estaban las palabras— «resucitó de entre los muertos…», pero enmudeció al instante, asustado de lo que estaba sucediendo en la primera planta del andamio. Nadie le prestó atención; habían levantado el ataúd; el ataúd, conducido a hombros, se balanceaba y, con él, el crucifijo que llevaba atornillado; el relojero Samwald, bajo y cargado de espaldas, se unió con los demás parientes al grupo que portaba el féretro; detrás seguían los médicos y luego todos los demás. Al final de la comitiva, vestido con la bata de enfermo, avanzaba cojeando el albañil Gödicke apoyándose en sus dos bastones.

Cuando llegaron al camino ancho, la enfermera Mathilde se dio cuenta de su presencia. Se acercó a él:

—Gödicke, usted no puede venir así… Dese cuenta… con la bata…

Pero él no la escuchaba. Ni siguiera se dejó convencer cuando ella solicitó del médico jefe que la secundara, sino que, con la mirada fija hacia delante, prosiguió impertérrito su camino. Finalmente, Kuhlenbeck dijo:

—¡Bah, déjelo! La guerra es la guerra… Cuando se canse, que un hombre se quede con él y le ayude a regresar.

Era un largo camino el que hacía Ludwig Gödicke; las mujeres rezaban a su alrededor y los bordes del camino se veían cubiertos de arbustos. Cuando un grupo terminaba las avemarías, empezaba otro, y en el bosque se oía cantar al cuclillo. La mayoría de los hombres, y también el relojero Samwald, vestían trajes oscuros como los de los carpinteros. A veces la comitiva se apelotonaba, en especial en los recodos del camino, donde la marcha se hacía más lenta y obligaba a los cuerpos a apretarse unos contra otros; y las faldas de las mujeres eran como su bata de enfermo; las faldas les golpeaban las piernas al andar y una de las mujeres de delante caminaba con la cabeza inclinada y cubriéndose el rostro con un pañuelo. Y aunque el buen Gödicke no la miraba sino que mantenía los ojos fijos en la lejanía y en las huellas que dejaba el carruaje, aunque intentaba una y otra vez cerrar los ojos y apretar los dientes a fin de que los fragmentos de su alma se unieran mejor y ahogaran su Yo, aunque habría preferido detenerse, afianzar sus bastones en el suelo y obligar a la gente a detenerse también y a callar, aunque habría preferido ver cómo se

dispersaban en todas direcciones, sin embargo, algo le arrastraba, le empujaba, y él flotaba, oscilaba: él era también un ataúd oscilante en medio de la reiterativa ola de plegarias que le acompañaba.

Cuando, ya en el cementerio, se bendijo de nuevo el féretro y, ante la fosa donde lo depositaron, volvió a elevarse la letanía «y resucitó de entre los muertos», cuando el relojero Samwald rompió en sollozos sin apartar su mirada de la fosa y todos se acercaron para echar un poco de tierra sobre el combatiente y estrecharle la mano al relojero, la figura de Gödicke, con la bata gris del hospital, apoyado en los dos bastones, con su barba flotando al viento, se irguió, a la vista de todos, frente al pequeño relojero Samwald y junto a la fosa, pero ni siquiera miró la mano que aquel le tendía, sino que, con un supremo esfuerzo, aunque inteligible para todos, pronunció sus primeras palabras:

—Resucitó de entre los muertos —dijo.

Y, a continuación, dejó a un lado los bastones, pero no porque deseara coger la pala y echar tierra en la fosa, no, no por esto, sino para hacer algo absolutamente distinto e inesperado: se dispuso a meterse él mismo en la fosa, se propuso, fatigosa y dificultosamente, bajar a la fosa, e incluso logró deslizar una pierna por encima del borde. Naturalmente, su comportamiento resultó incomprensible para todos: creyeron que, al no haber caminado nunca sin los bastones, se había caído al fallarle las fuerzas. El médico jefe de Estado Mayor y otros de los presentes se precipitaron hacia él, lo sacaron de la fosa y lo condujeron hasta uno de los bancos del cementerio. Tal vez al buen Gödicke le fallaban de verdad las fuerzas; no opuso resistencia y se quedó allí, sentado, en silencio, con los ojos cerrados y la cabeza caída hacia un lado. El relojero Samwald, que también se había acercado corriendo y había ayudado a transportarlo, permaneció a su lado, y como un dolor muy profundo hace que el alma del ser humano se sensibilice, Samwald intuyó que acababa de suceder algo especial. Sentado a su lado, habló al albañil Gödicke y le consoló como se hace con una persona sumida en el dolor; le habló como se habla a alguien que debe soportar el peor de los sufrimientos; le habló de su hermano muerto, que había tenido una muerte joven y sin dolor. Y el buen Gödicke escuchaba con los ojos cerrados.

Entretanto las personalidades del lugar se habían acercado a la tumba; entre ellas, como le correspondía, se encontraba Huguenau, el cual vestía un traje azul, llevaba un rígido sombrero negro en una mano y, en la otra, una corona. Y Huguenau miró indignado a su alrededor buscando al hermano del difunto, que no estaba en su sitio para poder admirar la corona, una hermosa corona de roble, costeada por la asociación Gratitud Moselana, un trabajo en verdad hermoso con una cinta en la que podía leerse: «La patria al valiente guerrero».

LIII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 8

Como en un brote de futuros mares de espejos
descansan en la espuma argéntea del arco iris,
aliento que flota sobre el húmedo espacio,
los lazos temblorosos de las lanzas doradas del sol,
y allá, en la franja más lejana
donde el cielo, pariéndose a sí mismo,
él mismo espejo en un mar de espejos,
se sumerge en el sueño de Afrodita:
¿fue entonces cuando le ocurrió?
¿fue entonces cuando se enteró,
apartado, contorsionado por los dolores de parir
la contranatura de una dulce violencia?
¿Había bosques en torno a las praderas
hundiéndose bajo los pasos del maldito?,
pues, retumbando en el enjambre de estrellas,
él es lanzado lejos por la voz,
y sus ojos no se iluminan cruelmente
hasta que cae como un remolino
sobre las rocas ardientes de amarillos barrancos
desintegrándose en la violencia
y quebrantándose en el débil intento
de escapar al mundo del fuego,
de regresar al bosque de cipreses
y a los arbustos que emergen en las mareas;
el día y la noche se unen en la sombra,
el perfume, como aliento, sale suavemente a buscar otros perfumes,
crepúsculo matutino de pinos y de hayas,
él buscará eternamente este momento,
pues lo ha olvidado para siempre

al asustarse por la voz,
y porque todo su ser, al ser despertado de repente,
le colma por completo, y entretanto
el no-ser descubre su ser
grávido de dudas, infinitamente desierto:
¿era el mar? ¿eran cipreses?
Pero la voz lo ha cubierto,
aquella voz que le ha empujado a lo alto,
aquella voz a la que él está sometido;
si la encontrara de nuevo estaría purificado,
y todo lo olvidado resucitaría,
surgiría de nuevo en el espeso olor del mar,
reflejándose en sus orillas los bosques de las praderas y las hayas.
Pero el saber que en él ha renacido
le arrastra de la duda a nuevas angustias de duda
y le acosa a través de los desiertos
en busca de la voz que él perdió para siempre,
y él se arrodilla ante ella,
intenta una y otra vez recobrarla
con el juramento que prestó en falso,
aquel juramento a quien una vez le eligió,
un traidor: y su boca se transforma en grito,
en un grito que atonta el saber,
un grito de los rugidos primitivos de los abismos,
grito que se expande por el resplandor del desierto,
grito del animal sin envoltura,
grito de la bestia salvaje en los abismos del fuego,
¡oh, grito del estupor! ¡grito del que padece tribulación!
¿Siento yo el estupor, el milagro del estupor?
¿o es mi yo el que se sorprende?
¿De qué frontera vienes tú, pensamiento,
la más profunda de las contingencias?
¡Yo, Ahasverus, floto en el espacio de la muerte,
gritando, eternamente gritando!
¡A la luz infernal, insomne, amarillenta y sangrante
se secan mis manos, se seca mi rostro,
yo mismo parido para el grito, yo, Ahasverus!,
acosado desde el principio primero, perseguido hasta el abismo,
elevado a la cima del saber, devorado por la duda,
sembrando piedras, alimentando polvo,
uncido al saber, consumido de anhelos,
bendecido por la voz, maldecido por la voz, sembrador bendecido del fruto prohibido.

LIV

En cierto modo, el mayor se sintió desagradablemente inquieto cuando el ordenanza le anunció la visita del redactor señor Esch. ¿Sería aquel periodista un enviado de Huguenau, un mensajero de los bajos fondos y del mundo subterráneo? El mayor tenía casi olvidado que el propio Huguenau había trazado una línea divisoria entre él y Esch, supuesto sospechoso político, y, como tras unos instantes de vacilación no halló nada decisivo, optó por decir finalmente:

—Bueno es igual… Que pase.

A decir verdad, Esch no daba la impresión de ser un enviado del infierno, ni tampoco un individuo políticamente sospechoso; permanecía encogido y confuso como quien se arrepiente de haber tomado una decisión:

—Mi comandante, se trata de… Bueno, abreviando, su artículo me ha llegado al alma, mi comandante…

El Mayor Von Pasenow se dio clara cuenta de que, por muy halagüeño que resultara creer que sus observaciones como escritor causaban impacto, no debía dejarse seducir por palabras capciosas.

—… y aunque me haya calificado de demonio al que habría que expulsar…

A esto el mayor se sintió obligado a precisar que una cita bíblica no tiene nada que ver con una alusión personal, ya que ello supondría incluso restarle dignidad a la Biblia, y que, a cada nueva orientación de la vida, sobre todo cuando se trata de mejorarnos, todos nosotros hemos de dejar atrás algún fragmento del demonio que llevamos dentro. O sea que si el señor Esch había acudido, aunque tardíamente, a exigir una reparación o una justificación, podía darse por satisfecho con aquella aclaración.

Durante el discurso del mayor, Esch recuperó su aplomo:

—No, mi comandante, no se trata de eso. Incluso aceptaría lo de demonio… desde luego, no porque me

hayan confiscado el periódico más de una vez —hizo un gesto como descartando aquello—, no, mi comandante: de mí nadie podrá decir que mi anterior actividad en el periódico fuera menos honesta que la que desempeño en la actualidad. He venido por otro asunto.

Y solicitó del Mayor que tuviera a bien instruirles a él y a sus amigos —o hermanos, según expresó en su agitación— en el camino de la fe, ni más ni menos.

Tal y como estaba, de pie ante el escritorio, con el sombrero entre las manos, los pómulos cubiertos de manchas rojas debidas a la excitación, manchas que, al fundirse con la tez morena de la parte inferior de las mejillas, desaparecían, Esch le hacía pensar al mayor en el administrador de sus fincas. ¿Y qué tiene que decir un administrador a propósito de la fe? El mayor consideraba que el cuidado de las cuestiones de la fe era cosa que atañía al amo de las fincas. Y le vinieron a la mente imágenes de la vida religiosa habitual: vio la iglesia a la que solía acudir con su familia, en coche de altas ruedas en verano y en trineo bajo y cubierto de pieles en invierno; se vio dirigiendo la oración bíblica de Navidad y de Pascua frente a sus hijos y sirvientes; vio a las criadas polacas encaminarse con mantos y vestidos rojos a la iglesia católica del pueblo vecino; y aquella iglesia le recordó que el señor Esch pertenecía a la fe católica y romana, asoció a este, desagradablemente, con los braceros polacos y lo incluyó en el ambiente de inquietante desconfianza en el que, en parte por propia experiencia, en parte por su política y en parte por meros prejuicios, solía él colocar a la nación polaca. Y como suele suceder que, casi siempre, los problemas de conciencia del prójimo suscitan en nosotros malestar —en cierto modo porque exageramos que nos importan mucho, cuando en realidad nos importan mucho menos de lo que pretendemos aparentar—, el mayor invitó al señor Esch a tomar asiento, si bien no aludió al tema planteado sino que se limitó a interesarse por la prosperidad del periódico.

Pero Esch no era hombre que se dejara disuadir con facilidad:

—Precisamente en nombre del periódico tiene usted la obligación de escucharme, mi comandante —el mayor lo miró de forma interrogativa—. Sí, usted le ha trazado un camino nuevo a *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*… Ha sido usted, aunque yo me haya repetido muchas veces que es preciso imponer el orden en el mundo y que un redactor debe contribuir a hacerlo si no quiere ser un anarquista o un cerdo sin conciencia… Mi comandante, todo el mundo desea la salvación, todo el mundo teme el veneno, todos esperan que llegue la Redención y se ponga fin a la injusticia.

Había acabado por gritar y el mayor le miraba con aire distante. Esch recuperó el dominio de sí mismo:

—Mire usted, mi comandante, el socialismo es un síntoma más entre otros muchos… Pero después de su artículo del primer número… Mi comandante, se trata de la libertad y de la justicia en el mundo… Con las vidas ajenas no se juega, tiene que suceder algo, de lo contrario todos los sacrificios habrán sido inútiles.

—Todos los sacrificios inútiles… —repitió el mayor como evocando un recuerdo, luego se dominó—: ¿Acaso pretende usted, señor Esch, arrimar de nuevo el periódico al ascua del socialismo? ¿Y encima quiere mi protección?

La expresión de Esch revelaba desprecio y falta de respeto:

—No se trata del socialismo, mi comandante… se trata de una vida nueva… de la honestidad… de la búsqueda común de la fe… Mis amigos y yo hemos organizado una sesión de meditación bíblica… Mi comandante, usted escribió el artículo en serio, con el corazón en la mano; ahora no puede rechazarnos.

Quedaba claro: Esch pasaba factura, aunque solo fuera una factura espiritual, y el mayor no pudo evitar acordarse una vez más del administrador, sentado frente a él, en la cancillería, con sus cuentas; y también de los braceros polacos que procuraban tomarle el pelo. ¿No amenazaban también ellos con el socialismo? Pero tal vez algo hacía mucho tiempo olvidado le impulsó a decir:

—Siempre hay alguien que nos rechaza, señor Esch.

Esch se puso en pie y, como de costumbre, comenzó a recorrer la habitación de un lado a otro, a grandes zancadas. Los surcos junto a su boca se veían más profundos que nunca. Qué aspecto tan acongojado tiene, pensó el mayor, cuesta creer que hombre tan serio sea uno de esos que van de taberna en taberna y frecuentan casas de mala nota, un enviado del mundo subterráneo. Que fuera uno de esos hipócritas era cosa tan inimaginable como aquel mundo.

De improviso, Esch se plantó ante él:

—Mi comandante, para no andarme con rodeos… ¿Cómo puedo desempeñar bien mi tarea, cuando ni siquiera tengo claro si el camino no sería más fácil en el seno de la fe protestante?

Sin duda el mayor habría podido replicar que entre las obligaciones de un jefe de redacción no entraba, bajo ningún concepto, la de resolver problemas teológicos, pero la pregunta de Esch había sido tan directa y le había chocado tanto que no hallaba respuesta; no había gran diferencia entre aquella y la solicitud de Huguenau referente a los encargos del ejército y, por un instante, las figuras de ambos hombres parecieron querer fundirse de nuevo. El mayor apretó con la mano la cruz de hierro que llevaba sobre el pecho y adoptó una actitud oficial: ¿era propio de él, un militar en delicada posición, hacer prosélitos? En cierto modo la Iglesia católica era un aliado y, por otra parte, él tampoco podría asumir la responsabilidad de

incitar a un austríaco o a un búlgaro o a un turco a renunciar a su nacionalidad en favor de la alemana. Desde luego, la insistencia de Esch era molesta y, sin embargo, la situación poseía un dulce atractivo: ¿no era la gracia misma de la fe la que, renovándose y engendrando siempre fe nueva, se ocultaba tras aquella invitación a colaborar? No obstante, el mayor seguía resistiéndose y creyó necesario aclarar que él, siendo protestante, no se sentía llamado a servir de guía en cuestiones de fe a un católico.

Esch repitió su gesto de antes, gesto que daba por descontado que aquello no tenía nada que ver. En el artículo del mayor se decía que el cristiano ha de ayudar al cristiano; o sea, que no hay diferencia alguna entre la cristiandad católica y la protestante y, por otra parte, el párroco católico de la ciudad sabía todavía mucho menos que el comandante acerca de dudas y preguntas como aquellas.

El mayor no contestó. ¿Estaría realmente envuelto en la red de sus propias palabras y, valiéndose de ello, aquel hombre quería arrastrarle a los bajos fondos y a las tinieblas? Y, no obstante, parecía como si una mano suave quisiera conducirle hacia afuera, hacia las orillas silenciosas de unos ríos tranquilos. No pudo evitar pensar en el bautismo en el Jordán y, casi a su pesar, dijo:

—En cuestiones de fe, señor Esch, no hay nada prescrito; la fe es un manantial natural, la Biblia misma lo dice. —Permaneció un momento pensativo y añadió—: La fe es algo que cada uno debe experimentar por sí solo.

Esch se había vuelto descortésmente de espaldas al mayor; de pie, junto a la ventana, apoyaba la frente en el cristal. Al llegar a este punto se volvió; la expresión de su rostro era seria, casi suplicante:

—Mi comandante, no se trata de que haya o no algo prescrito… Se trata de confianza… —calló unos instantes— … de lo contrario sería, sería… —no daba con la palabra exacta— … de lo contrario el periódico no sería mejor que los demás periódicos… un periódico que se vende… absurdas charlas de demagogos… pero usted, mi Comandante, usted deseaba algo distinto.

El mayor Von Pasenow sintió de nuevo la dulzura de dejarse llevar por la corriente, de ser transportado lejos, como si una nube plateada quisiera elevarle, flotando, por encima de los ríos de primavera. ¡Refugio de la confianza! No, el hombre que estaba allí, de pie frente a él, no era un aventurero, no era un traidor, no era un hipócrita, no era hombre que quisiera llevarse la confianza al otro lado de la vida para dejarla allí, desnuda, impúdicamente expuesta. Y, titubeando primero, luego con más ardor cada vez, el mayor comenzó a explicar cosas del liderato de Lutero en cuya imitación nadie debía desesperar, ¡nadie, señor Esch!, puesto que cada uno lleva en el fondo de su alma la misma llama y —¡oh, y con qué fuerza lo sentía en sí mismo el mayor Von Pasenow aunque no le estuviera permitido decirlo!— nadie está excluido de la gracia. Todo aquel que vive en la gracia debería salir a predicar la salvación. Y todo el que profundice en su corazón hallará la verdad y el camino, hallará sin duda el camino que conduce a la luz y lo seguirá.

—Consuélese, señor redactor, todo se arreglará.

Y él estaba dispuesto, si el señor Esch lo deseaba y su escaso tiempo disponible se lo permitía, a volver a charlar con él —el mayor se levantó y le tendió la mano a Esch por encima de la mesa—; por otra parte, dentro de poco visitaría la imprenta de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris.* Hizo una inclinación a Esch. Este continuaba de pie, indeciso, y el mayor temió que le soltara un discurso de agradecimiento, pero no le dio las gracias sino que, casi con brusquedad, le preguntó:

—¿Y mis amigos?

El Mayor adoptó una vez más la actitud de rigidez oficial:

—Más adelante, señor Esch, más adelante.

Y Esch hizo una torpe inclinación.

Pero a Esch, con su impetuosidad habitual, ya nada podía detenerle. Pocos días después —con gran sorpresa de todos aquellos que se enteraron y, casi enseguida, de toda la población—, se convirtió a la fe protestante, lo que, para su alma inquieta, constituyó una especie de homenaje al mayor.

LV

Degradación de los valores 7
Digresión histórica

La época de crímenes y rebeldías que llamamos Renacimiento, la época en que la estructura de los valores cristianos se escindió en una mitad católica y otra protestante, la época en la que, con la desintegración del *organon* medieval, se inició un proceso de dispersión de los valores que duraría quinientos años, y en la que se sembró la simiente de lo moderno, época de siembra y, al mismo tiempo, de los primeros florecimientos, dicha época no puede definirse por el protestantismo ni por su individualismo, ni por su nacionalismo o su sensualismo, ni tampoco por su renovación humanística o científica. Si esa época que, gracias a su estilo, aparece con tanta evidencia como una unidad y agrupada en una totalidad; si esa época, como corresponde a esa uniformidad, ha poseído un espíritu de época y un prototipo de estilo, este

último no puede ser reivindicado al azar por uno cualquiera de sus múltiples fenómenos, aunque se trate de un fenómeno de fuerza tan profunda y revolucionaria como el protestantismo. Al contrario, todos esos fenómenos han de reducirse a un denominador común, han de poseer una raíz común y esta raíz ha de hundirse en la estructura lógica del pensamiento, en la lógica específica que impregna y nutre todos los actos de una época.

Puede afirmarse, y no sin razón, que en el estilo de pensamiento solo se da una revolución radical cuando el pensamiento tropieza precisamente con los límites de su finitud —y la revolucionaria transformación de todos los fenómenos vitales es demostración de ese cambio total en el pensamiento—, cuando ya no es posible seguir resolviendo la antinomia de lo infinito con los antiguos medios y, a partir de ahí, se hace entonces forzoso revisar sus fundamentos.

Donde con mayor claridad puede observarse dicho cambio radical del pensamiento —y ello porque se ha producido en nuestra más inmediata proximidad— es en la investigación de los fundamentos de la matemática moderna, la cual, partiendo de la antinomia del infinito, ha llegado a una transformación revolucionaria de los métodos matemáticos, a un cambio cuya envergadura todavía no puede apreciarse en la actualidad. En cualquier caso, no es posible dilucidar si se trata de una nueva revolución del pensamiento o de la última e irrevocable liquidación de la lógica medieval (probablemente sea ambas cosas), pues los restos del edificio de los valores medievales no solo llegan hasta nuestros días, haciéndonos suponer que también los restos de aquel pensamiento conservan su fuerza, sino que precisamente es la antinomia —y la esencia de la antinomia— de lo infinito lo que permite suponer que dichos restos se originan en la base de la deducción y, sin duda también, en la base de la teología. No existe ningún sistema teológico que no sea deductivo; es decir, que no intente deducir racionalmente todo lo fenoménico partiendo del principio más superior, es decir, Dios; y, considerado desde este punto de vista, todo tipo de platonismo es, en último término, teología deductiva. Aunque, en consecuencia con lo anterior, el contenido teológico-platónico no sea visible de inmediato en el sistema de la matemática moderna (e incluso deba permanecer oculto en tanto dicha matemática sea la expresión adecuada de la lógica dominante y sea, ella misma, lógica), sí se pone de manifiesto en cambio un sorprendente parentesco entre las antinomias de infinito de la matemática y de la Escolástica; desde luego, en la Edad Media las discusiones sobre el infinito no tenían lugar en el ámbito matemático, pero el infinito «ético», como sin duda podría llamársele tal y como aparece, por ejemplo, en el círculo de problemas relacionados con los infinitos atributos de Dios, contiene todas las cuestiones del infinito actual y potencial; presenta, conforme a unas estructuras, el terreno límite en el que se hallan las antinomias y las dificultades de la matemática moderna. Tanto en uno como en otro campo, las circunstancias antinómicas surgen de la elevación de la función lógica a lo absoluto, elevación inevitable en tanto la lógica dominante no quiera ceder e impalpable mientras no se alcance la frontera antinómica. Para la Escolástica esta fallida elevación a lo absoluto adquiere forma sobre todo en la interpretación de los símbolos: la Iglesia visible, o sea, su forma de existencia terrenal y finita (forma que, no obstante, exige lo absoluto). La aristotélica «reducción a lo finito» del punto infinitamente lejano lógico-platónico tenía que entrañar una reducción a lo finito de todas las formas simbólicas y se convirtió a su vez en un admirable sistema de reflejos simbólicos, un sistema que consiste en pasar de un símbolo a otro, conjuntados todos en una unidad mágica y a cubierto por la sombra del símbolo terrenal-sublime: el símbolo infinito-finito de la Eucaristía; y así, ya resultó imposible detener la confusión del pensamiento en el terreno de infinito, y el pensamiento escolástico tuvo que afrontar la delimitación antinómica del infinito, a fin de resolver de nuevo dialécticamente la idea platónica convertida en finita; es decir, preparar el retorno al positivismo y adoptar aquella evolución automática cuyos comienzos ya eran patentes en la formación aristotélica de la Iglesia y cuyo progreso ulterior no podía, sin embargo, pese a los muchos intentos efectuados por la Escolástica para salvarlo (doctrina de la doble verdad, lucha de los nominalistas con los realistas, nuevos fundamentos de la teoría del conocimiento por parte de Occam), no podía, pues, seguir siendo reprimido; la Escolástica tenía que fracasar a causa de la absolutización, a causa de las antinomias del infinito; la cosmología lógica quedaba abolida.

Pero todo pensamiento solo concuerda con los hechos mientras la confianza permanece fiel a su lógica. Esto es válido para cualquier pensamiento, y no únicamente para el dialéctico-deductivo (tanto más cuanto resulta imposible discernir hasta qué punto hay deducción en cualquier acto del pensamiento). Sería falso afirmar que la confianza se ha perdido porque el ser humano ha aprendido de repente a observar los hechos con otros y mejores ojos. Precisamente sucede al contrario: los hechos no se observan de modo distinto hasta que la dialéctica no se ha desmoronado, y este desmoronamiento no puede atribuirse a un fracaso ante la realidad, una realidad que todavía hubiera sido válida durante largo tiempo, sino que tiene que haberse producido dentro del terreno mismo de la lógica, o sea, frente al problema del infinito. La paciencia del ser humano ante la autoridad de la lógica es inagotable y solo es comparable a su inmutable paciencia frente al arte de la medicina. Al igual que el cuerpo humano se somete a los tratamientos más extravagantes e, incluso, al hacerlo así, sana, así también la realidad sostiene los

edificios teóricos más inconcebibles: en tanto la propia teoría no se declare en crisis, sigue apoyándose en la confianza y la realidad se le somete. Hasta que la crisis no se hace patente, no empieza el hombre a frotarse los ojos y a volverse otra vez hacia la realidad, a abandonar el terreno de las conclusiones racionales y a trasladarse al de las experiencias vivas a fin de dar con el manantial de su conocimiento.

Estas dos fases de la revolución intelectual se observan a la perfección a finales de la Edad Media: declaración de quiebra por parte de la dialéctica escolástica y, como consecuencia inmediata —y verdaderamente copernicana—, orientación hacia el objeto inmediato. O, dicho en otros términos, paso del platonismo al positivismo, del lenguaje de Dios al lenguaje de las cosas.

Pero con este paso del *organon* eclesiástico centralista a la multiplicidad de las posibles formas de expresión inmediatas, con este traslado del edificio platónico de la teocracia medieval a la visión positivista del mundo empírico —existente y en perpetuo movimiento—, con esta atomización de la antigua totalidad, con todo ello tenía que producirse, necesaria y paralelamente, una atomización de todos los valores en tanto estos se funden con los objetos. En resumen, la ideología de los valores ya no se rige a través de una oficina central, sino que recibe sus impactos del objeto; ya no se trata de conservar la cosmogonía bíblica, sino de observar *científicamente* el objeto natural y de experimentar qué puede hacerse con él; ya no se trata de edificar la Ciudad de Dios, sino de un objeto que se ha politizado a sí mismo y que requiere un nuevo método político adecuado bajo la forma de maquiavelismo; el caballero ya no consagra su espíritu a la guerra absoluta, como en las cruzadas, sino a una lucha terrenal sostenida con armas de fuego, nuevas e impropias de caballeros; ya no se trata de algo que afecta al cristianismo, sino de determinados grupos humanos empíricos cuyas nacionalidades ellos mantienen a través de signos externos idiomáticos; los intereses del individualismo en vías de introducción no se dirigen al hombre como miembro del *organon* eclesiástico, sino al individuo en su propia significación; y para el arte, la comunidad de los santos y su glorificación dejan de ser el último y único fin, ya que se apoya mejor en la fiel observación del mundo externo, en aquella fidelidad que constituye el naturalismo del Renacimiento. Pero por muy mundano que parezca este volcarse hacia el objeto inmediato, por mucho que el invocar alegremente la Antigüedad vuelta a descubrir suponga paganización, el objeto externo se impone con idéntica fuerza que el interno, y la inmediatez del Renacimiento quizá radique en esta visión interior: Dios, que hasta ahora únicamente podía manifestarse a través de la jerarquía platónico-eclesiástica, se convierte en conocimiento místico inmediato, y ello en virtud de la visión interior del alma, en virtud del descubrimiento de la llamita que arde en el fondo del alma; se convierte en gracia reencontrada. Y esta sorprendente coexistencia de la vida mundana y pagana más externa con la interioridad más consecuente del protestantismo místico, esta cohabitación de valores de las tendencias más dispares dentro de un estilo único sería inexplicable si no fuera posible atribuirla al denominador común de la inmediatez. El protestantismo, al igual que todos los demás valores del Renacimiento y tal vez con más fuerza aún que ellos, se convirtió en un fenómeno de lo inmediato.

Pero hay otra característica constitucional y muy decisiva de dicha época, época que puede justificarse partiendo de todo esto: es el fenómeno del «acto» que con tanta evidencia aparece en todas las manifestaciones vitales del Renacimiento, y no solo en el protestantismo; es decir, el incipiente desprecio por la palabra, el cual desea limitar cuanto sea posible la expresión lingüística a su autonomía poética y retórica e impedir que se filtre en los demás terrenos y, en su lugar, pone, como factor único, al hombre de acción; tendencia esta hacia el enmudecimiento que debía preparar el mutismo del mundo entero. Todo ello relacionado, aunque de forma no reconocible, con la desintegración del mundo en ámbitos de valores aislados, todo ello depende de la inclinación hacia el lenguaje de las cosas, el cual, siguiendo con esta misma imagen, es un lenguaje mudo. Parece que se quisiera demostrar que la comprensión entre los ámbitos de valores aislados, es casi inútil, o que una comprensión de este tipo podría falsear el rigor y la claridad del lenguaje-cosa. Los dos grandes medios de comprensión racional de la época moderna —el lenguaje científico en la matemática y el lenguaje del dinero en la contabilidad— hallaron su punto de partida en el Renacimiento, ambos surgieron de aquella limitación, exclusiva y unívoca, al ámbito de los valores que le son propios y, también, de un esoterismo de la expresión cuyo rigorismo casi podría calificarse de ascetismo. No obstante, dicha orientación del espíritu poco tenía en común con el ascetismo católico-monástico, pues dicha orientación no es, como el ascetismo, un medio para conseguir un fin, no quiere servir de «ayuda» estática, sino que ha surgido de la univocidad del acto, acto que en adelante será considerado como el único lenguaje unívoco al que el hecho se someterá. Así también el protestantismo es, en su origen y esencia, «acto», presupone al hombre actuando en Dios, buscando a Dios y encontrando a Dios, un hombre dotado de una actividad igual a la que es propia de los nuevos investigadores de la naturaleza, de los nuevos guerreros y de los nuevos políticos. La religiosidad de Lutero es, sin duda alguna, la de un hombre de acción y radicalmente distinta en el fondo de la contemplativa. Pero en el «acto», en dicho «positivismo», radica precisamente el rigorismo, el cumplimiento imperativo-categórico del deber, la cerrazón frente a todos los demás valores, la ascética casi iconoclasta de un Calvino, una ascética que se diría propia de la teoría del conocimiento, una ascética que llevó al propio Erasmo a exigir que la música

fuera suprimida en los servicios divinos.

De hecho también la Edad Media conocía el «acto». Y cuanto más el nuevo positivismo se apartaba del platonismo escolástico, al relegar al individuo a su Yo solitario, tanto más dejaba al descubierto las «raíces positivistas» del platonismo. El nuevo cristianismo no se limitaba a protestar, sino que también reformaba. Tenía la absoluta sensación de ser un renacimiento del pensamiento cristiano y, aunque al principio se presentara sin teología, luego desarrolló, sobre una base más autónoma y reducida, una teología idealista-platónica pura (pues como tal puede ser considerada la filosofía kantiana). La «orientación de los valores» y el imperativo ético sobre el acto no habían cambiado con respecto a la Edad Media, ni tampoco hubieran podido cambiar, ya que solo en la voluntad de acción hacia el valor y hacia su poder absoluto se construye el valor; no existen otros valores que los absolutos. Lo que había cambiado era la delimitación del acto que establece un valor: mientras que, anteriormente, la intensidad de absolutización se había centrado en el valor global del *organon* cristiano, ahora el radicalismo de la lógica establecida en sí misma y el rigor de su autonomía se ordenaban por separado, de acuerdo con cada ámbito aislado; cada uno de estos ámbitos aislado fue convertido en un ámbito de valores propios y elevado a la categoría de absoluto; y así apareció en el mundo aquella vehemencia según la cual los ámbitos de valores elevados al rango de absoluto deben coexistir, sin puentes ni relaciones entre ellos; aquella vehemencia que dio al Renacimiento su peculiar tonalidad.

Desde luego podría objetarse que el estilo global de la época abarcaba por igual todos los ámbitos de valores, por muy diferentes que estos fueran, e incluso que una personalidad como la de Lutero no se limitaba en absoluto, como un asceta, a un solo ámbito, y más aún, que precisamente en él se unen de modo peculiar las circunstancias religiosas y las mundanas. Pero también se puede afirmar que en todo ello solo hay que observar el comienzo de una evolución que necesitaría quinientos años para alcanzar su total expansión; que la época se hallaba henchida de nostalgia de la síntesis medieval y que, precisamente una personalidad como la de Lutero —que en rigor había dejado de ser lógica, pero que gracias a su riqueza humana abarcaba valores de las más diversas tendencias—, saliendo al paso de las necesidades de la época, la convirtió en su propia época e influyó en ella mucho más que Calvino «más lógico». Se diría que la época todavía tenía miedo del rigorismo, tenía miedo del mutismo que comenzaba, se diría que quería tapar el mutismo que se avecinaba y que, por ello, tuvo que convertirse en la hora del nacimiento del nuevo lenguaje de Dios, en la hora del nacimiento de la música polifónica. Pero todo esto son suposiciones no demostrables. En cambio, parece mucho más seguro que la situación de la época, la confusión de sus comienzos, fue lo que posibilitó la Contrarreforma católica, y que el miedo ante la incipiente soledad y el aislamiento preparó un movimiento que prometía reencontrar la unidad. Pues la Contrarreforma católica se hizo cargo de la gigantesca tarea de reunir de nuevo los ámbitos de valores aislados (separados por la religiosidad exclusivista del protestantismo), de intentar una nueva síntesis del mundo y de todos sus valores, y de procurar, bajo la dirección de la nueva escolástica de los jesuitas, alcanzar la totalidad medieval, a fin de que la unidad platónica de la Iglesia, reinando como valor supremo sobre todos los demás valores, conservara para siempre su posición divina.

LVI

El relojero Samwald acudía ahora con frecuencia al hospital. Visitaba las dependencias donde habían atendido a su hermano y, deseoso de mostrar su agradecimiento, no solo regulaba gratis los relojes del hospital sino que se había ofrecido para reparar también y sin retribución alguna los relojes de todos los internos. Y además visitaba al reservista Gödicke.

Gödicke aguardaba estas visitas. Desde el día del entierro veía muchas cosas con mayor claridad y serenidad; su elemento terrenal se había condensado y, no obstante, parecía más elevado y etéreo, sin por ello haber perdido seguridad. Ahora sabía con absoluta certeza que no tenía por qué seguir temiendo la oscuridad, la barrera de tinieblas tras la cual se hallaba antes el otro Gödicke o, mejor dicho, los otros muchos Gödicke todos, pues aquello pertenecía simplemente al tiempo en que estuvo en la tumba. Y si ahora aparecía alguien queriendo hacerle recordar lo otro, lo que había sucedido antes de estar enterrado, ya no había por qué tener miedo, sino que, por así decirlo, se podía prescindir de aquel temor con un encogimiento de hombros, porque sabía que ya no significaba nada. Ahora solo tenía que esperar; pues, por mucho que se le aproximara, la vida que iba fraguándose a su alrededor no tenía por qué inspirarle miedo: él ya había dejado atrás la muerte y todo lo que viniera tan solo serviría para ir alzando cada vez más el andamio. Desde luego todavía no pronunciaba una sola palabra ni escuchaba a las enfermeras o a los compañeros de habitación cuando le hablaban, pero su mutismo y su sordera actuales no eran tanto desprecio y castigo para los que turbaban su paz como defensa de su Yo y de su soledad. Solo soportaba al relojero Samwald; sí, le esperaba.

Por su parte, Samwald le facilitaba las cosas. Cuando Gödicke, curvado y apoyado en sus bastones, se

acercaba al pequeño relojero, incluso podía mirarlo desde arriba; claro que esto no era en modo alguno esencial. Lo más importante era que Samwald, como si supiera a quién tenía delante, no hacía el menor intento de preguntarle o hacerle recordar cosas que a él, Ludwig Gödicke, le resultaran desagradables. En realidad Samwald hablaba muy poco. Se sentaban juntos en un banco del jardín, le enseñaba los relojes que había recogido para reparar, abría la tapa de atrás a fin de que el engranaje quedara a la vista e intentaba explicar dónde estaba el fallo. O hablaba de su hermano muerto, quien, según él decía, era digno de envidia, porque lo había superado todo y ahora se hallaba en un más allá mucho más hermoso. Pero cuando el relojero comenzaba a hablar del Paraíso y de la dicha celestial, entonces, por una parte tenía que rechazar el tema, pues correspondía a las clases de catecismo del desaparecido muchacho Gödicke, aunque por otra parte fuera como un homenaje a Gödicke hombre, como una pregunta dirigida a este, que sabía mucho más, pues marchaba ya por el más allá. Y cuando Samwald explicaba las reuniones bíblicas que solía frecuentar y en las que aprendía muchas cosas, cuando afirmaba que la miseria de la guerra tenía que conducir el alma a un estado de salvación mucho más luminoso, Gödicke no le escuchaba en absoluto, a pesar de que pareciera que aquellas palabras le traían una lejana confirmación de su vida reencontrada y un requerimiento a ocupar un sitio en esta vida —un sitio conveniente— y, en cierto modo, un sitio en el más allá. Entonces veía al pequeño relojero como a uno de los muchachos o de las mujeres que llevaban ladrillos a la obra y a los que uno no se dignaba dirigir la palabra, a no ser para gritarles groseramente, pero que, no obstante, eran necesarios. Probablemente esta fue la razón por la cual un día se sintió impulsado a interrumpir al pequeño relojero en sus explicaciones y decirle con tono autoritario:

—Ve a buscarme una cerveza.

Y como la orden no fuera cumplida al instante, se quedó mirando fijamente ante sí con aire ausente y orgulloso. Estuvo muchos días enfadado con Samwald, ni se dignaba mirarle, y Samwald se devanaba los sesos buscando la forma de reconciliarse con Gödicke. Le resultaba bastante difícil, ya que ni el mismo Gödicke sabía que estaba enfadado con Samwald y sufría mucho al verse obligado a volver la cabeza —por obra del imperativo de un desconocido mandamiento— cada vez que aparecía. Y no era que considerase a Samwald autor de dicho mandamiento, sino que en su interior le culpaba de que dicho mandamiento no hubiera sido abolido. Se diría que entre ambos se había establecido una especie de búsqueda recíproca, y el relojero tuvo una idea casi genial el día, un hermoso día, en que cogió a Gödicke hombre de la mano y lo arrastró consigo.

La tarde era cálida y maravillosa; el relojero Samwald llevaba al antaño albañil Gödicke cogido de la manga de la guerrera, con mucho cuidado, paso a paso, procurando evitar los puntiagudos cantos de basalto del camino. A veces se detenían a descansar. Y, cuando habían descansado un poco, Samwald tiraba suavemente de la manga de Gödicke. Gödicke se levantaba y seguían caminando. Así fue como llegaron a los dominios de Esch.

La escalera que conducía a la redacción era demasiado empinada para Gödicke, y Samwald lo sentó en el banco que había frente al jardín y subió él solo. Regresó en compañía de Esch y de Fendrich.

—Este es Gödicke —dijo Samwald.

Gödicke no saludó. Esch quiso llevarlos al pabellón del jardín, pero, al pasar frente a los depósitos de estiércol, cuyas ventanas estaban abiertas porque Esch había efectuado ya la primera siembra con vistas a la producción agrícola de otoño, Gödicke se detuvo y se quedó mirando las cavidades donde yacía la tierra parda.

—¿Qué pasa? —dijo Esch.

Pero Gödicke seguía mirando con fijeza los depósitos de estiércol. Con las cabezas descubiertas y sus trajes oscuros, se detuvieron todos, como reunidos alrededor de una tumba abierta.

—El señor Esch es el que organiza las lecturas de la Biblia… —dijo Samwald—. Queremos alcanzar el Cielo.

Entonces Gödicke el hombre se rió, aunque no de un modo salvaje; tal vez fue solo una sonrisa sonora, y dijo:

—Gödicke Ludwig, resucitó de entre los muertos.

No lo dijo muy alto, pero miró a Esch con aire triunfal, irguió su humilde postura encorvada y pareció casi tan alto como él. Fendrich, que llevaba la Biblia bajo el brazo, le miró a su vez con ojos febriles de tuberculoso y luego, como queriendo cerciorarse de que Gödicke existía de verdad, le rozó el uniforme. Sin embargo, para Gödicke el hombre la cosa había terminado —él había cumplido con su parte, por cierto que no había resultado demasiado fatigoso, pero tenía derecho a descansar—, así que, sencillamente, se dejó caer sentado en el marco de madera de los depósitos de estiércol, esperando que Samwald se sentara a su lado. Samwald dijo:

—Está cansado.

Y Esch se dirigió a grandes pasos hasta el patio y, al pie de la ventana de la cocina, le gritó a su mujer que trajera café. Después la señora Esch trajo el café y fueron a buscar también a Lindner, a la imprenta, para que tomara café con ellos, y todos se quedaron de pie, alrededor de Gödicke, viendo cómo este,

sentado en el borde del depósito de estiércol, sorbía su café. Solamente Gödicke veía algo distinto. Cuando Gödicke se hubo repuesto gracias al café, Samwald volvió a cogerlo de la manga y emprendieron el camino de regreso al hospital. Andaban con mucho cuidado, y Samwald procuraba que Gödicke no tropezase con las piedras puntiagudas. De vez en cuando, se detenían a descansar. Y, cuando Samwald sonreía, Gödicke ya no desviaba la mirada.

LVII

Sí, Huguenau estaba de mal humor. La proclama en favor del «Bismark de hierro» había caído lamentablemente en el vacío. Que en la imprenta no hubiera ningún clisé del que sacar el retrato de Bismark era disculpable, pero ni tan siquiera había uno con la auténtica Cruz de Hierro y sus ramas de laurel, así que no quedó otra alternativa que colocar en las esquinas una de las pequeñas cruces con que normalmente solían adornarse las esquelas de los caídos en el campo de batalla. Desde luego él no habría ido personalmente a ver al mayor con aquel papelucho, de no haber tenido en el bolsillo una buena noticia: un taller de escultura de Giessen, cuyo anuncio había descubierto y al que había telegrafiado de inmediato, se brindaba a moldear y a enviar en el plazo de dos semanas una estatua de Bismark. Pero, como era lógico, al mayor le habían decepcionado mucho aquellas proclamas de tan mal gusto: primero, ni le escuchó y, luego, se limitó a cortar el diluvio de excusas con un indiferente «tanto da». Y aunque al fin se dejó convencer para efectuar aquel mismo día su anunciada visita, lo estropeó todo de nuevo al interesarse por Esch. Lo que resultaba tanto más injusto siendo Esch el culpable de que no hubiera en la imprenta clisés adecuados.

Huguenau, con las manos en los bolsillos, paseaba patio arriba patio abajo esperando al mayor. En lo que a Esch se refería, Huguenau lo había urdido todo muy bien. El día anterior le había impedido, con suma astucia, ir a la fábrica de papel, y hoy, hoy resultaba que aquello había sido un fallo y que, cosa extraña, en el almacén había poco papel, con lo cual había conseguido alejar al señor redactor. Lo malo era que el individuo en cuestión había considerado necesario llevarse la bicicleta y, si el mayor seguía haciéndose esperar durante mucho tiempo aún, todo el plan se vendría abajo y acabarían por encontrarse los dos allí.

El día era cálido y pesado. Huguenau miró un par de veces el reloj, fue luego hacia el huerto, observó la fruta que colgaba aún verde de las ramas y calculó el valor de la cosecha. De todos modos, en los tiempos que corren, nada llega a madurar, todo lo roban antes. Una mañana Esch se encontrará con que le han vaciado el huerto. No durará mucho: en la zona donde da el sol, las ciruelas ya empiezan a estar rojas, y Huguenau, alzando un brazo, palpó la fruta con los dedos. Esch tendría que poner una alambrada de púas alrededor del huerto; claro que lo más seguro es que la cosecha no compense semejante gasto. Cuando termine la guerra, el alambre de púas irá más barato.

Esperar es como tener un alambre de púas en el espíritu. Huguenau volvió a contemplar las copas de los árboles. Parpadeó al mirar hacia las nubes grises: allí, donde el sol se ocultaba, había una blancura deslumbrante. Silbó varias veces a Marguerite, pero esta no apareció y Huguenau se sintió ofendido: naturalmente, estaría otra vez en el río con los muchachos. Le hubiera gustado ir a buscarla. Pero tenía que esperar al mayor.

De pronto —cuando se disponía a silbarle otra vez—, Marguerite apareció a su lado. Él dijo en tono severo:

—¿Dónde te metes? Esperamos visita.

Después la cogió de la mano, atravesaron juntos el patio, cruzaron el corredor de entrada a la casa y se detuvieron fuera, en la calle Fischer, mirando a ver si venía el mayor. «He alejado a Esch demasiado pronto», se repetía Huguenau.

Por fin el mayor dobló la esquina; le acompañaba el viejo oficial de intendencia, quien, al propio tiempo, hacía las veces de oficial adjunto en la comandancia. Aunque había contado con tener al mayor para él solo, Huguenau se sintió halagadísimo de que la visita fuera a desarrollarse con tan marcado tono oficial. En realidad había sido una tontería quitarse de encima a Esch; todo el personal hubiera tenido que estar allí, de pie, y Marguerite, con un vestidito blanco, hubiera tenido que ofrecerle un ramo de flores. En cierto modo, también había que responsabilizar a Esch de semejante negligencia, pero ya estaba hecho y el ceremonial de Huguenau hubo de limitarse a una serie de reverencias ante los dos oficiales, detenidos ahora ya frente a la puerta.

Afortunadamente, el oficial de intendencia se despidió enseguida, de modo que la situación pasó del plano oficial al privado y, cuando el mayor pisó el umbral, Huguenau desbordaba confianza y sumisión por todos sus poros.

—Marguerite, haz una reverencia —dijo autoritario.

Marguerite miró con fijeza el rostro de aquel extraño. El mayor le pasó una mano por los negros rizos:

—Se dice buenos días, pequeña tártara.

—Es la pequeña de Esch… —se disculpó Huguenau.

El mayor cogió a Marguerite por la barbilla:

—¿De modo que tú eres la hija de Esch?

—Solo vive aquí… Es casi una hija adoptiva —informó Huguenau.

El mayor volvió a acariciarle los rizos:

—Pequeña tártara morenita… —repitió mientras atravesaban el corredor.

—Nació en Francia, mi comandante… Esch quiere adoptarla eventualmente… Pero es absurdo. De todos modos vive en casa de una tía suya… ¿No preferiría mi comandante visitar la imprenta ahora mismo…? Por aquí, por favor, a la derecha…

Huguenau corría delante.

—Un momento, señor Huguenau, primero me gustaría saludar al redactor señor Esch.

—Esch llegará de un momento a otro, mi comandante; yo he creído que mi comandante querría, ante todo, visitar las instalaciones sin que le molestaran.

—El señor Esch no me molesta en absoluto —dijo el mayor con un tono algo cortante, que hirió a Huguenau.

Huguenau olfateaba alguna intriga de Esch… Bueno, ya saldrían sus manejos a la luz y entonces habría un segundo juicio secreto muy sabroso. Y, como no cabía duda de que lo habría, Huguenau se tranquilizó (porque no hay alma que soporte que una fuerza exterior detenga o ponga trabas a su impulso interno). Así pues, Huguenau dijo con tono mesurado:

—El señor Esch, desgraciadamente, ha tenido que ir a la fábrica de papel… He tenido que ocuparme del suministro de papel… Pero, entretanto, mi comandante podría visitar la imprenta.

En honor del mayor pusieron en marcha la máquina impresora y, en honor del mayor, Huguenau hizo imprimir, sin ninguna necesidad, una partida de las proclamas de la «Gratitud Moselana». Seguía llevando a Marguerite de la mano y, cuando Lindner amontonó la primera partida de las proclamas, Huguenau cogió la hoja de encima y se la tendió al mayor. De nuevo creyó que debía disculparse:

—Es una impresión muy sencilla; por lo menos hubiera tenido que llevar una auténtica Cruz de Hierro con una guirnalda de laurel… ¡en una empresa patrocinada por el Comandante en persona!

El mayor se llevó la mano a la Cruz de Hierro que lucía en el ojal y pareció tranquilizarse al notar que seguía allí.

—¡Ah, la Cruz de Hierro! ¿Otra más? ¿Para qué? No es necesario.

—Mi comandante tiene razón, sí; en estos tiempos tan difíciles basta con una impresión sencilla. Estoy de acuerdo con mi comandante, pero un pequeño grabado sin pretensiones no habría causado gastos extras… Naturalmente, al señor Esch lo mismo le da.

Daba la impresión de que el mayor no le había oído, pero, al cabo de un momento, dijo:

—Señor Huguenau, creo que es usted injusto con el señor Esch.

Huguenau sonrió cortésmente, aunque con cierto desprecio. Pero el mayor no le miraba a él sino a Marguerite:

—Hubiera dicho que esta muchachita tártara y morena era eslava.

Huguenau se sintió obligado a volver a aludir al origen francés de la pequeña:

—Se pasa el día aquí, simplemente.

El mayor se inclinó hacia Marguerite:

—En casa, también yo tengo una niña así, claro que es un poco mayor; tiene catorce años y, desde luego, no es tan morena como una pequeña tártara… Se llama Elisabeth… —Calló un momento, y añadió —: O sea, que francesita.

—Solo sabe alemán —dijo Huguenau—, lo ha olvidado todo.

—¿Quieres mucho a tus padres adoptivos, verdad? —preguntó el mayor.

—Sí —dijo Marguerite.

A Huguenau le sorprendió que mintiera con tanto descaro, pero, como el mayor tenía un aire ausente, él, para subrayarlo, repitió:

—Vive con unos parientes.

El mayor dijo:

—Despojada de la casa paterna…

En realidad, aquello no venía a cuento; desde luego era un viejo, y Huguenau le hizo coro:

—Es verdad, mi comandante, es la expresión justa: despojada de la casa paterna…

El mayor miró fijamente el rostro de Marguerite. Huguenau intentó atraer su atención:

—El taller de composición, mi comandante, todavía no ha visto usted el taller de composición.

El mayor pasó una mano por la frente de la niña:

—No debes mirar así, tan enfadada; no debes arrugar la frente de este modo…

La niña se quedó muy seria, pensativa.

—¿Por qué? —dijo luego.

El Mayor sonrió, le acarició con suavidad los párpados, tras los que se notaba, duro, el glóbulo ocular, y le dijo sonriendo:

—Las niñas no han de fruncir el ceño… Es un pecado… Un pecado oculto y visible al mismo tiempo, como es siempre el pecado.

La niña hizo un movimiento brusco para desasirse y marcharse, y Huguenau recordó cómo la niña se había desembarazado de Esch. Marguerite tiene razón, pensó. Ahora el mayor se pasaba la mano por sus propios ojos:

—Bueno, no tiene importancia…

Y Huguenau, intuyendo que el mayor también quería irse, aunque con menos energía, se alegró de ver que llegaba Esch, montado en su bicicleta, con las piernas muy arqueadas, porque era demasiado baja, y de verle entrar en el patio y desmontar junto a la escalera de madera.

Salieron todos al patio a recibir a Esch, y el mayor iba entre Huguenau y la niña.

Esch apoyó la bicicleta en la pared de debajo de la escalera de gallinero y se dirigió hacia el grupo. No demostró sorpresa, ninguna sorpresa, al encontrar allí al mayor, y lo saludó con tanta naturalidad, que Huguenau sospechó que aquel flaco maestro de escuela ya estaba advertido de su presencia allí.

—Bueno, ¿no dice usted nada ante un honor tan inesperado? —manifestó su mal humor—. ¿Acaso no está usted sorprendido?

—Me alegro mucho —dijo Esch.

—Y yo me alegro de que haya usted regresado a tiempo, señor Esch —dijo el mayor.

—Tal vez a la hora duodécima, mi comandante.

—No es tan tarde… —observó Huguenau—. ¿No le gustaría a mi comandante visitar las demás dependencias? Por desgracia la escalera es un tanto incómoda…

—Ha sido un largo camino —dijo Esch.

La niña dijo:

—Ha venido en bicicleta.

—Un largo camino… y todavía no ha llegado a la meta —dijo, pensativo, el Mayor.

—Ya hemos pasado lo peor… —dijo Huguenau—. Ya tenemos dos páginas de anuncios y si lográramos encargos de la administración militar…

—No se trata de anuncios —dijo Esch.

—Ni siquiera tenemos un clisé con la Cruz de Hierro… ¡Claro que, sin duda, tampoco debe de tratarse de eso, según usted!

La niña señaló el pecho del mayor:

—Ahí tiene la Cruz de Hierro.

—Los signos de distinción son siempre invisibles —dijo el mayor—, solo el pecado se ve.

—Mentir es el peor de los pecados —dijo la niña.

—Lo invisible nos sigue los pasos —intervino Esch—. Venimos de la mentira y, si no encontramos el camino, nos extraviamos en las tinieblas de lo invisible.

—Nadie sabe cuándo decimos una mentira —dijo la niña.

—Dios lo sabe —dijo el mayor.

—Nadie hace caso de un desertor —dijo Huguenau—, aunque tenga razón en lo que dice.

—Nadie ve a los demás en la oscuridad —dijo Esch.

—Visibles y, no obstante, ocultos para los demás —dijo el mayor.

—Dios no hace caso —dijo la niña.

—Algún día volverá a escuchar la voz de los niños —dijo Esch.

—Más vale que nadie escuche a nadie —dijo Huguenau. Hemos de arreglárnoslas solos… y lo lograremos.

—Nosotros le abandonamos y Él nos ha dejado solos… —dijo el mayor—, tan solos que ya no podremos volver a encontrarnos.

—Encarcelados en la soledad —dijo Esch.

—A mí nadie podrá encontrarme —dijo la niña.

—Tendremos que buscar eternamente a Aquel a quien hemos abandonado —dijo el mayor.

—¡Tú quieres esconderte! —dijo Huguenau.

—Sí —dijo la niña.

El cielo, lechoso y grisáceo, comenzó a despejarse; aquí y allá se mostraba azul. La niña, descalza, se alejó sin hacer el menor ruido. Luego, también los hombres se fueron. Cada uno en una dirección.

Ayer, Nuchem y Marie estuvieron otra vez en mi casa y cantamos juntos. A petición mía, primero cantamos el himno siguiente:

Gozosos vamos a la batalla,
la fe ilumina nuestro valor
y no sentimos ante Satán
de su ira miedo
ni de su horror.
Nuestro estandarte de orgullo ondea
al viento y marcha presto a triunfar,
siempre delante, eternamente
es nuestro guía
para luchar.

CORO
Siempre fieles te seremos,
fieles siempre hasta morir
nuestras vidas te ofrecemos,
oh, bandera, rojo-oro-azul.

Lo cantamos con la melodía de la *Canción de Andres Hofer*: Marie acompañaba con el laúd, Nuchem cantaba a boca cerrada y llevaba el compás con suaves palmadas. Durante la ejecución, se miraban con frecuencia uno a otro, o tal vez me lo parecía a mí porque las palabras del doctor Litwak me habían puesto sobre aviso. En cualquier caso, yo cantaba hasta desgañitarme y por diversas razones. Por una parte, porque quería tranquilizar a la familia que, entretanto y sin duda alguna, se habría congregado ante mi puerta —los niños empujándose para situarse en primera fila y tal vez, pegando la oreja a la madera; el abuelo de barba blanca, con el busto inclinado hacia delante y haciendo de la mano pabellón para la oreja a fin de oír mejor; las mujeres detrás, llorando algunas en silencio, y todos avanzando poco a poco, pero sin atreverse a abrir la puerta—, sí, por una parte porque quería tranquilizar a la familia, pero, por otra, porque me producía un placer sádico saber que estaban allí fuera, saber que los atraía y que los alejaba. Pero desgañitándome quería también decirles a Nuchem y a Marie: «No sintáis vergüenza, hijos míos, como veis estoy por completo absorbido en mí mismo y por mi voz; desabróchate la levita, Nuchem, levanta tus faldones, haz una reverencia ante la muchacha, y tú, Marie, deja de hacer remilgos, cógete la falda con la punta de los dedos y bailad los dos, danzad hacia Jerusalén, danzad en mi cama, actuad como si estuvierais en vuestra propia casa». Y dejé de cantar el texto de Marie y canté el mío propio, más adecuado: «El fiel Hofer yacía atado en Mantua»; por desgracia no sabía más, pero modulé este verso en distintos tonos y lo encontré oportuno y hermoso.

Marie concluyó la canción con el acorde de laúd con que terminan todas las canciones:

—Lo hemos hecho muy bien —dijo—. Ahora, a modo de recompensa, recemos un poco.

Se deslizó de la silla, se llevó las manos al rostro y empezó el salmo 122: «Me he alegrado porque me dijeron: Iremos a la casa del Señor. Ya se posan nuestros pies en tus puertas, ¡oh, Jerusalén! Jerusalén, edificada como una ciudad en sí toda compacta; allí suben las tribus, las tribus del Señor, según la ley de Israel, a ensalzar el nombre del Señor».

Yo no podía detenerla, a no ser rompiéndole el laúd en la cabeza. Así que me arrodillé también, extendí los brazos y recé: «Preparemos té para las hijas y los jóvenes de Israel, echemos ron en el té, ron de guerra, ron de héroes, ron falso, para narcotizar nuestra soledad, pues nuestra soledad es grande en demasía, ya sea en Sión, ya sea en la ciudad santa de Berlín». Pero, mientras yo, golpeándome el pecho con los puños, pronunciaba estas palabras, Nuchem se había levantado: de pie ante mí, dándome la espalda y mirando hacia la ventana, donde, ondeando como una bandera rojo-oro-azul descolorida, colgaba en el hálito de la noche una rota y grasienta cortina de algodón, comenzó a menearse hacia delante y hacia atrás. ¡Oh!, era indigno, aquello era indigno de Nuchem, quien, al fin y al cabo, era amigo mío.

Di un salto hacia la puerta, la abrí de golpe y grité hacia afuera:

—Entra, Israel, toma el té con nosotros, observa los obscenos movimientos de mi amigo y el rostro desencajado de mi amiga.

Pero la antesala estaba vacía. Habían desaparecido como por arte de magia, huyendo precipitadamente a sus habitaciones, mezclándose las mujeres con los niños y, en medio de ellos, el abuelo octogenario, que apenas si podía incorporarse.

—Bueno —dije cerrando la puerta y volviéndome de nuevo hacia los fantasmales seres de mi habitación—, bueno, hijos míos, daos el beso de Sión.

Pero ellos dos, de pie, con los brazos inertes, no se atrevían a abrazarse, no se atrevían a bailar, seguían allí, de pie, sonriendo como idiotas. Y finalmente, tomamos el té.

LIX

Simposio o coloquio sobre la redención

Incapaz de comunicar consigo mismo, incapaz de hacer que estalle su soledad, condenado a representarse a sí mismo, sustituto de su propio ser, el ser humano solo ha podido aprender del ser humano —y seguirá aprendiéndolo— un símbolo, el símbolo de un Yo inabarcable que no va más allá del valor de un símbolo: y todo cuanto pueda decirse se convierte en símbolo de un símbolo, se convierte en un símbolo de segunda, tercera, enésima derivación y exige, en el verdadero doble sentido de la palabra, una representación. Por ello a nadie le creará problemas y servirá para abreviar la narración, que nos imaginemos al matrimonio Esch enzarzado, en compañía del mayor y de Huguenau, en una escena de teatro, en una representación a la que nadie puede escapar: interpretar sus propios personajes.

En el pabellón del jardín de Esch, y sentados en torno a la mesa, se hallan la señora Esch, a su derecha el mayor, Huguenau a su izquierda y, frente a ella, de espaldas al público, el señor Esch. La cena ha concluido. Sobre la mesa, pan y el vino que el señor Esch ha conseguido de un viticultor que se anuncia en su periódico.

Comienza a oscurecer. En el último término, el perfil de las montañas todavía visibles. En torno a las dos velas que arden protegidas por pretendidos globos de jardín, revolotean los insectos. Oímos los asmáticos suspiros de la máquina de imprimir.

ESCH: ¿Me permite que le sirva un poco más, mi comandante?

HUGUENAU: Maravilloso vinillo, no se le puede poner un solo pero. Ya podemos retirarnos nosotros con nuestros vinos de Alsacia. ¿Conoce usted nuestros vinos alsacianos, mi comandante?

MAYOR *(con aire ausente)*: No creo…

HUGUENAU: Bueno, es un vino inofensivo… Nosotros, los alsacianos, somos de natural inofensivo… Es, por así decirlo, un caldo noble, que no engaña *(ríe)* y, después, a lo sumo, una borrachera sencillita y natural… Cuando uno ya tiene bastante, se duerme y en paz.

ESCH: Una borrachera jamás es natural, una borrachera es un envenenamiento.

HUGUENAU: Vaya, vaya, pues, mire usted por dónde, me acuerdo yo de alguna ocasión en que usted se ha permitido tomar unas copitas, incluso sin tener sed… En la taberna Zur Pfalz, por citar solo un ejemplo… Además *(mira fijamente a Esch),* a mí no me parece usted tan falto de veneno.

MAYOR: Sus ataques contra nuestro amigo Esch son muy lamentables, señor Huguenau.

ESCH: Déjele, mi comandante, no habla en serio.

HUGUENAU: ¡Claro que hablo en serio…! Yo siempre digo lo que pienso, sin rodeos… Nuestro amigo Esch es un lobo con piel de cordero… No me echo atrás… Y, con su permiso, le diré que se emborracha en secreto.

ESCH *(despectivo)*: A mí todavía no me ha tumbado ningún vino…

HUGUENAU: Sí, sí, claro: siga siempre sobrio, señor Esch, y así nunca se traicionará.

ESCH: Es posible que beba algún día, pero entonces el mundo se vuelve tan sencillo que parece hecho solo de verdades… Tan sencillo como en sueños… Sencillo y, no obstante, lleno de nombres impúdicos y falsos… El nombre auténtico nunca se alcanza…

HUGUENAU: Debería usted beber vino de misa y así alcanzaría ese nombre… o el Estado futuro, según se mire.

MAYOR: No hay que blasfemar ni en broma… También el pan y el vino encierran símbolos.

(Huguenau se da cuenta de que ha dado un paso en falso y se sonroja.)

SEÑORA ESCH: ¡Ay, comandante!, cuando mi marido y el señor Huguenau están juntos, siempre ocurre lo mismo… Cierto que «quien bien te quiere te hará llorar», pero a veces resulta insoportable oírle arrastrar por el lodo lo que para mi pobre marido es sagrado.

HUGUENAU: ¡Sagrado aparentemente! *(Recuperado el control de sí mismo, enciende con toda ceremonia el puro que se le había apagado.)*

ESCH *(sumido en sus pensamientos)*: En sueños, la verdad camina siempre con muletas… *(Da un golpe sobre la mesa.)* El mundo entero camina con muletas… Un aborto que cojea.

HUGUENAU: ¿Un inválido?

ESCH: Si en el mundo existe un solo fallo, si existe un solo lugar donde lo falso debe ser lo verdadero, entonces… entonces sí que el mundo todo es falso… todo irreal… escamoteado por una magia diabólica.

HUGUENAU: Por arte de birlibirloque.

MAYOR *(sin atender a Huguenau)*: No, mi querido Esch, al contrario: basta con que haya un solo justo entre mil pecadores…

HUGUENAU: El gran mago Esch.

ESCH *(con grosería)*: ¿Qué sabe usted de magia? *(A gritos)*: Usted, como mucho, es un prestidigitador, un ilusionista, un lanzador de cuchillos…

HUGUENAU: Señor Esch, modérese, que no está solo.

ESCH *(más tranquilo)*: La magia, la prestidigitación son diabólicas, son el Mal: hacen que el desorden sea cada vez mayor.

MAYOR: Allá donde falta el conocimiento, allá reside el Mal.

ESCH: Pero antes ha de venir Aquel que subsanará el fallo y establecerá el orden… Aquel que ofrecerá su vida en holocausto, para redimir al mundo y darle una inocencia nueva…

MAYOR: Aquel que asumirá la prueba… *(con seguridad)*, pero Ese ya ha llegado: Él fue quien aniquiló el falso conocimiento y expulsó a los magos.

ESCH: Todavía hay tinieblas y el mundo se resuelve en tinieblas… Clavado en la cruz y atravesado por la lanza en la suprema soledad…

HUGUENAU: Uf, qué desagradable.

MAYOR: Una espantosa oscuridad le rodeaba, una penumbra llena de opaca inseguridad, y nadie se acercó a Él para ayudarle en su soledad… Pero Él tomó el Mal sobre sí, Él liberó al mundo del Mal…

ESCH: Todavía existen el asesinato y el contraasesinato, y no habrá orden hasta que todos despertemos…

MAYOR: Asumir la prueba, ser despertados y arrebatados al pecado…

ESCH: Nada se ha decidido aún, simplemente estamos encarcelados y tenemos que esperar…

MAYOR: Estamos cercados por el pecado, y el espíritu es antiespíritu…

ESCH: Esperamos el Juicio; como al condenado, aún nos queda la última gracia para empezar una nueva vida… El Mal no ha triunfado todavía.

MAYOR: Liberados del antiespíritu, liberados por la Gracia… Entonces el Mal habrá desaparecido y nunca habrá estado aquí…

ESCH: Era una magia maligna, un engaño…

MAYOR: El Mal se mantiene siempre fuera del mundo, fuera de sus límites; solo aquel que traspasa esos límites, aquel que se sale de la verdad, solo ese se precipita en el abismo del Mal.

ESCH: Nosotros nos hallamos al borde de ese abismo… al borde del negro pozo…

HUGUENAU: Esto es demasiado elevado para nosotros, ¿verdad, señora Esch?

(La señora Esch se arregla los cabellos por detrás. Después se lleva un dedo a los labios para imponer silencio a Huguenau.)

ESCH: Todavía han de morir muchos, muchos han de sacrificarse para hacerle sitio al Hijo, que tendrá derecho a reedificar la casa… Solo entonces se despejará la niebla y aparecerá, luminosa e inocente, la nueva vida…

MAYOR: El Mal no está entre nosotros sino en apariencia, adoptando todo tipo de formas, pero jamás en sí mismo… símbolo de la Nada. Únicamente la Gracia es verdadera.

HUGUENAU *(que no acepta verse relegado al papel de mero y silencioso espectador)*: Bueno, si el robo, los atentados contra la infancia, la deserción o la malversación de fondos solo son simples apariencias, hay que reconocer que el panorama no es tan desolador.

MAYOR: El Mal no existe. La Gracia ha redimido al mundo del Mal.

ESCH: Cuanto peor es el Mal, más profundas son las tinieblas; cuanto más afilados son los cuchillos que rasgan el aire, tanto más cerca está el reino de la Redención.

MAYOR: Únicamente el Bien es auténtico y real… Solo existe un pecado: no querer el Bien, negarse al conocimiento, carecer de buena voluntad…

HUGUENAU *(impulsivo)*: Exacto, mi comandante, así es… Yo, por ejemplo, no soy un ángel, desde luego que no… *(reflexivo)*: En cualquier caso, no se me podría castigar… Un desertor, por ejemplo, si tiene buena voluntad no debería ser fusilado, es solo un ejemplo…

ESCH: Por muy alto que esté, nadie tiene derecho a juzgar a otro; no existe nadie tan depravado cuya alma eterna no imponga respeto.

HUGUENAU: Desde luego.

MAYOR: Aquel que quiere el Mal, puede querer el Bien al mismo tiempo, pero el que no quiere el Bien ha jugado con la Gracia y ha perdido… Es el pecado de la testarudez, la apatía del sentimiento.

ESCH: No tiene nada que ver con las buenas obras o con las malas…

HUGUENAU: Perdone usted, mi Comandante, pero eso no es del todo exacto… Una vez perdí seiscientos marcos, una bonita suma, en un asunto de quiebra, en Reutlingen, ¿y por qué?, pues porque aquel hombre se hallaba poseído de delirio religioso, cosa que naturalmente yo no podía prever… Era justo que lo absolvieran y lo encerraran en un manicomio, pero mi dinero había volado.

ESCH: ¿A qué viene eso?

HUGUENAU: Viene a que aquel era un hombre bueno que, a pesar de serlo, cometió malas obras… *(socarrón)* y, si usted me mata, señor Esch, le dejarán libre debido a su delirio religioso; en cambio, si yo le mato a usted, a mí me cortarán la cabeza… ¿Qué dice usted a esto, señor Esch, con toda su aparente santidad, eh? *(Mira al comandante buscando su aprobación.)*

MAYOR: El que delira es como el que sueña: posee la falsa verdad… maldice a su propio hijo… Nadie es impunemente el portavoz de Dios… únicamente el señalado…

ESCH: Posee la falsa verdad… Todos nosotros poseemos la falsa verdad… ¡En justicia, todos deberíamos ser declarados locos!, locos en nuestra soledad.

HUGUENAU: Sí, ¡pero a mí me fusilarán y a él no! Perdóneme, mi Comandante, se lo ruego, pero precisamente ahí reside su aparente santidad… *(exaltándose): ¡Ah, merde, la sainte religion et les cures à faire des courbettes auprès de la Guillotine, ah, merde, alors…* Yo soy un hombre ilustrado, pero esto pasa de castaño oscuro.

MAYOR: Pero, señor Huguenau, señor Huguenau, al parecer el vino de Mosela es peligroso para su temperamento… *(Huguenau hace un gesto de disculpa.)…* Asumir, voluntariamente, la prueba y el castigo, como hemos tenido que asumir la guerra por culpa de nuestros pecados, no es falsa santidad.

ESCH *(como ausente)*: Sí, asumir el pecado… en la suprema soledad…

(La prensa ha dejado de funcionar. Los golpes enmudecen. Se oye el canto de los grillos. El viento nocturno agita las hojas de los árboles frutales. En torno a la Luna se ven algunas nubes iluminadas y blanquecinas. En el repentino silencio que se ha producido, la conversación se detiene.)

SEÑORA ESCH: ¡Qué bien este silencio!

ESCH: A veces el mundo parece todo él una máquina horrible incapaz de detenerse jamás… La guerra y todo… todo obedece a unas leyes incomprensibles… Leyes insultantes, seguras de sí mismas, leyes de ingenieros… Cada uno ha de actuar como le está prescrito, mirando todos hacia delante… Cada uno es una máquina, vista desde fuera solamente, y una máquina hostil… ¡Oh, sí, la máquina es el Mal y el Mal es la máquina! El orden de la máquina es la Nada, la Nada que ha de llegar… antes de que el tiempo vuelva a empezar.

MAYOR: ¡Símbolo del Mal!

ESCH: Un símbolo sí.

HUGUENAU *(prestando atención en dirección a la imprenta, tranquilizado)*: Ahora Lindner pondrá papel nuevo.

ESCH *(angustiado de repente)*: Dios mío, ¿es que no existe la posibilidad de que un ser humano se aproxime a otro? ¿No existe la comunicación? ¿No existe la mutua comprensión? ¿Todos hemos de ser para los otros una máquina maldita y nada más?

MAYOR *(pone su mano sobre el brazo de Esch, conciliador)*: Pero Esch…

ESCH: ¿Hay alguien que no sea peligroso para mí, Dios mío?

MAYOR: Quien te haya reconocido, hijo mío… Solo el que conoce puede superar el distanciamiento.

ESCH *(cubriéndose el rostro con las manos)*: Dios, tú has de conocerme.

MAYOR: Solo a aquel que posee el conocimiento se le da el conocimiento, solo aquel que siembra amor recoge amor.

ESCH *(siempre con las manos ante el rostro)*: Puesto que yo te conozco, ¡oh, Dios!, ya no te enojarás conmigo, porque yo soy tu hijo, rescatado de la orfandad… El que se arriesga a la muerte está dentro del amor… Solo a aquel que se lance a superar el distanciamiento y la muerte, solo a ese le será dada la unidad.

MAYOR: Y la Gracia descenderá sobre él y le librará del miedo, de la angustia de haber caminado por la tierra sin ningún sentido, de tener que avanzar hacia la Nada, absurdamente, desamparado e ignorante…

ESCH: Y así el conocimiento se convertirá en amor y el amor en conocimiento; toda alma destinada a ser vaso de la Gracia es inviolable; sumida en el amor, creadora de la comunidad de las almas inviolables y solitarias todas y, sin embargo, unidas en el conocimiento… Supremo mandamiento del conocimiento: no herir nada viviente… Si te he conocido, ¡oh, Dios!, seré inmortal en ti.

MAYOR: Quítate una tras otra las máscaras hasta desnudar tu rostro y tu corazón. Entregado al aliento del Eterno…

ESCH: … en un vaso vacío me convierto;
desprendido de todo y sin deseos
el castigo yo asumo y me disuelvo

en la Nada. Terrible, ¡oh, terrible angustia!

MAYOR: … en la angustia germina el mensaje
de la gracia divina; la angustia
es el mandato de Dios a las puertas
de la salvación. ¡Crúzalas!

ESCH: Reconóceme, oh Señor, en mi espantosa miseria;
cuando caiga sobre mí la antesala de la muerte,
sobre mí que tanto anduve en sueños, reconóceme.
Sobre mí pesa la angustia, solo estoy y abandonado,
separado soy de todo en mi muerte solitaria.

(Huguenau les escucha sin entender palabra. La señora Esch oye a su marido atemorizada.)

MAYOR: Y, no obstante, no estás solo al disolverte en la Nada, liberado ya del Mal, acallada al fin la angustia,
disminuyéndote tú a mayor gloria de Dios.
Porque entonces solo tú, tú que has sabido, sabrás:
poderoso el universo surge y el mundo florece.

ESCH: Si en el amor a Aquel yo te conozco
que en el amor me ha conocido a mí,
el desierto se vuelve para mí jardín de luz eterna,
y las praderas se alargan infinitas y el sol brilla.

MAYOR: Jardín de la Gracia, jardín que se extiende
sobre el mundo todo, dulzuras de brisa
de la primavera, oh patria, refugio carente de angustia.

ESCH: Pecador fui y malvado,
en la angustia fui malvado a conciencia,
conocí el mal camino y cacé junto al abismo,
seco el rostro, y las manos también secas,
por desiertos perseguido y por quebradas
—de la lanza escapando y escapado:
en la nuca las angustias de Ahasverus,
en los pies los terrores de Ahasverus,
en los ojos los anhelos de Ahasverus—
por aquel a quien siempre yo perdía,
por aquel a quien nunca yo veía,
por aquel que, siendo uno,
traicioné y sin embargo me eligió,
entregado a la tormenta,
tormenta de hielo en lluvia de estrellas…
Fermentando, la semilla enterrada de la gracia
hoy florece y su fruto es salvación,
salvación que me fue dada…

MAYOR: Sé, pues, para mí el hermano que perdí, el hermano de antaño.
Como hermano ven a mí.

(El mayor con voz de barítono y el señor Esch con voz de tenor, cantan alternativamente y al estilo del Ejército de Salvación.)

Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos,
acógenos en tu gracia,
cíñenos en tu lazo de unidad,
con tu mano guíanos
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.
Del laberinto al camino recto,
a la tierra prometida llévanos,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.

HUGUENAU *(que hasta este momento ha seguido el ritmo golpeando la mesa con la mano, canta ahora con su* voz *de tenor)*:
Protégenos de la flecha y de la rueda,

protégenos de la mano del verdugo,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.

LOS TRES JUNTOS:
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.
SEÑORA ESCH *(que apenas tiene voz, canta también)*:
Siéntate como invitado a mi mesa,
la que hallé preparada para Ti,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.
TODOS *(Huguenau y Esch tamborilean sobre la mesa)*:
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos,
salva mi alma,
sálvala de la muerte,
no permitas que nunca más sufra,
haz que se bañe en la fe
y protégela de todo mal,
apártala de la futilidad,
aviva su llama para que arda
en fuego de púrpura,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos,
sálvame, ¡oh, sálvame de la muerte!

(El mayor pasa su brazo por los hombros de Esch. Huguenau, todavía con el puño sobre la mesa, deja caer ahora su brazo lentamente. Las velas se han consumido. La señora Esch sirve a los hombres el vino que queda, procurando que todos tengan la misma cantidad: el poquito que sobra lo vierte en el vaso de su marido. La luna se ha oscurecido y del campo llega un aire más fresco, como salido de la boca de un sótano. La imprenta vuelve a trabajar con roncos gemidos. La señora Esch toca a su marido en el brazo):

¿Vamos a acostarnos?

CAMBIO DE ESCENA

(Frente a la casa de Esch. El mayor y Huguenau.)

Huguenau, señalando con el pulgar la ventana del dormitorio del matrimonio Esch:

—Ahora se meten en la cama. Esch hubiera podido quedarse con nosotros, pero ella sabe muy bien lo que quiere… Bueno, si usted me lo permite, mi comandante, le acompañaré un trecho… Un poco de ejercicio va bien.

Caminan por las silenciosas calles medievales. Los portales de las casas son como negros agujeros. En uno de ellos, hay una pareja de enamorados, muy pegados a la puerta; de otro sale un perro corriendo a tres patas calle arriba y desaparece en una esquina. Detrás de algunas ventanas todavía arde una luz macilenta, pero ¿qué sucede tras las que no están iluminadas? Es posible que, tendido en su cama, yazga algún cadáver, la afilada nariz apuntando al aire y la sábana formando como una pequeña tienda de campaña sobre los tiesos dedos de los pies. Tanto el mayor como Huguenau miran hacia las ventanas, y a Huguenau le gustaría preguntarle si él piensa también, y sin poder evitarlo, en los muertos, pero el mayor camina en silencio, casi preocupado. Probablemente estará pensando en Esch, se dice Huguenau, y desaprueba que Esch esté acostado junto a su mujer preocupando con ello al buen viejo. Pero ¡por todos los diablos! ¿De qué se preocupa? ¡En lugar de defenderse de semejante caballo con aires de santo, se ha hecho en seguida amigo de Esch! Una simpática amistad se ha establecido entre los dos caballeros, los cuales, evidentemente, han olvidado que sin él jamás se habrían conocido. ¿Quién tiene, pues, prioridad sobre el mayor? Y si el mayor está ahora preocupado, es muy justo. Más aún, si de derecho y justicia se tratara, no saldría tan bien librado, ya que el mayor tendría que pagar, junto con su querido Esch, por esta traición… Huguenau se quedó perplejo; de pronto se le había ocurrido, con toda lucidez, una idea arriesgada y excitante: ¡establecer con el mayor una relación temeraria y arriesgada, engañar en cierto modo a Esch, metido en la cama con su mujer, valiéndose del mayor y poniendo al mayor en una situación humillante! Sí, era una idea estupenda y prometedora, y Huguenau dijo:

—Usted recordará, mi comandante, que en mi primer informe hablaba de una visita a la casa de pu… —Huguenau se mordió los labios—, perdón, a la casa de mala nota. Ahora, el señor Esch está virtuosamente acostado en su lecho matrimonial, pero en aquella ocasión vino con nosotros. En el ínterin,

yo he seguido haciendo averiguaciones sobre el asunto y creo haber hallado algunos datos. Me gustaría echarle otro vistazo a la casa… Si mi comandante sigue interesado en este asunto y, cómo diría yo, le interesa aquel ambiente, yo le aconsejaría con todo respeto que fuera ahora mismo.

El mayor paseó una vez más su mirada por las hileras de ventanas, por los portales de las casas, semejantes a bocas de negros subterráneos y luego, con gran sorpresa de Huguenau, sin oponer la menor resistencia, dijo:

—Vamos.

Dieron la vuelta, porque la casa se hallaba en dirección contraria y en las afueras de la ciudad. El mayor, tal vez más ensimismado que antes, caminaba de nuevo en silencio junto a Huguenau, y Huguenau, pese a que tenía muchas ganas de charlar llana y familiarmente, no se atrevía a iniciar una conversación. Pero le aguardaba algo todavía más desagradable: al llegar frente a la casa, sobre cuya puerta lucía un brillante farol de color rojo, el mayor dijo de repente:

—No —y le tendió la mano. Como Huguenau le mirara fijamente y muy desconcertado, hizo un esfuerzo por sonreír. Será mejor que hoy efectúe usted solo las averiguaciones.

El anciano dio media vuelta y emprendió el camino de regreso a la ciudad. Huguenau, lleno de rabia y amargura, le siguió con la mirada; de todos modos, se acordó de Esch y, encogiéndose de hombros, abrió la puerta.

Salió de la casa al cabo de una hora escasa. Estaba de mejor humor; la angustia que antes tanto le pesaba había desaparecido, había puesto en orden algo, aunque no hubiera podido definir qué, y sabía que se había restituido a sí mismo y a su positivismo. Que los demás lo excluyeran, le importaba un bledo. Caminaba con pasos vigorosos, pisando fuerte y, como le viniera a la mente un himno del Ejército de Salvación que debía de haber oído no sabía dónde, comenzó a marcar el compás golpeando el suelo con el bastón: «Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos».

LX

Fiesta de la Asociación Gratitud Moselana en la cervecería Stadthalle para conmemorar la victoria de la batalla de Tannenberg

Jaretzki deambulaba por el jardín de la Stadhalle. Dentro había baile. Naturalmente, aun siendo manco, hubiera podido bailar como los demás, pero se sentía acomplejado. Se alegró de encontrar a la enfermera Mathilde en la puerta de la sala:

—Bueno, ¿tampoco usted baila, enfermerita?

—Pues claro que bailo, ¿quiere que probemos, teniente Jaretzki?

—Hasta que no tenga el trasto ese, la prótesis, no será posible sacar partido de mi persona… Solo beber y fumar… ¿Un cigarrillo, enfermera Mathilde?

—¡Qué cosas se le ocurren! Estoy de servicio.

—¡Ah, ya! O sea que usted baila en acto de servicio. Entonces, tenga la bondad de ocuparse de un pobre manco… Siéntese un rato conmigo. —Algo pesadamente, se sentó a la mesa próxima—. ¿Le gusta esto, enfermerita?

—Sí, es agradable.

—Pues a mí no me gusta.

—La gente lo pasa bien, hay que dejar que se diviertan alguna vez.

—¿Sabe una cosa…? Puede que esté borracho… pero eso no importa… Yo le digo que esta guerra no acabará jamás… ¿Usted qué opina?

—Bueno, al final tendrá que acabar…

—¿Y qué haremos cuando ya no haya guerra, cuando ya no se fabriquen lisiados para que usted los cuide?

La enfermera Mathilde se quedó pensativa:

—Después de la guerra… Bueno, usted sí sabe lo que quiere hacer. Me ha hablado de una colocación…

—Mi caso es diferente… Yo he estado en el frente… He matado gente. Perdone, tal vez le parezca algo duro, pero para mí la cosa está clara… Asunto resuelto… Sin embargo, ahí están los demás —señaló hacia el jardín—… Tendrán que arrimar el hombro… Parece ser que los rusos ya están organizando batallones de mujeres…

—Desde luego, sabe usted asustar a cualquiera, teniente Jaretzki.

—¿Yo? ¡Qué va…! Para mí el asunto está resuelto, ¿no…? Volveré a mi casa… Buscaré una mujer… noche tras noche la misma… Estoy harto de ir por ahí de put… Me parece que estoy un poco bebido de verdad… Pero, mire, no está bien que el hombre esté solo… Ya lo dice la Biblia. Y usted cree en la Biblia, ¿no es cierto?

—¿No le gustaría irse ahora mismo, teniente Jaretzki? Algunos de los nuestros regresan ya… Podría volverse con ellos.

Ella notó en pleno rostro la vaharada de alcohol del aliento de Jaretzki:

—Le digo, señorita, que la guerra no puede terminar porque el hombre se haya quedado solo… porque uno tras otro vayan todos quedándose solos… Todo el que está solo tiene que matar a otro… Usted piensa que he bebido demasiado, pero usted sabe que aguanto mucho… No hay motivo para meterme en la cama, seguro… Pero todo lo que le digo es la pura verdad. —Jaretzki se levantó—: ¡Qué música tan rara…! No sé qué pueden estar bailando. ¿Vamos a mirar un poco?

El doctor Ernst Pelzer, combatiente voluntario, de la sección de lanzaminas, se tropezó con el presuroso Huguenau:

—¡Vaya, el maestro de ceremonias…! Es usted un auténtico torbellino… Siempre corriendo tras las damas…

Huguenau, sin oírle en absoluto, señaló con evidente satisfacción hacia dos caballeros que, vestidos de etiqueta, avanzaban por el jardín:

—¡Ha llegado el señor alcalde!

—¡Ajajá! Caza mayor… Pues que siga la buena caza, que siga la buena suerte, cazador, ¡viva el noble cazador!

—Gracias, gracias, doctor —dijo Huguenau que seguía sin hacerle caso, y, dándole la espalda, se dirigió hacia los recién llegados para pronunciar el saludo oficial de bienvenida.

El médico jefe del Estado Mayor doctor Kuhlenbeck tenía en realidad su sitio en la mesa de las personalidades del lugar, pero no se detuvo allí mucho tiempo.

—Disfrutemos —dijo—, somos lansquenetes en una ciudad conquistada.

Se dirigió hacia un grupo de muchachas. Llevaba la cabeza muy erguida, tanto que la barba le apuntaba al frente. Al pasar por delante del soldado de infantería Kneese, quien, con aire triste y aburrido, estaba apoyado en un árbol, le dio un golpecito en el hombro:

—¿Qué, está de luto por su apéndice? Todos vosotros me parecéis hermosos lansquenetes que han venido dispuestos a violar a las mujeres… Es para avergonzarse de vosotros, estropajos… ¡Adelante, gallina!

—A la orden, doctor jefe —dijo Kneese cuadrándose.

Kuhlenbeck se colgó del brazo de Berta Kringel, apretándolo contra sí:

—Ahora bailaré con todas por turno… La que baile mejor, recibirá un beso.

Las muchachas gritaron, Berta Kringel intentó soltarse. Pero cuando él, con su manaza masculina, rodeo aquella manita de muchacha burguesa y uñas recortadas, notó que los dedos de ella dejaban de forcejear y se amoldaban a su carne.

—O sea que no queréis bailar… Parece que todas me tengáis miedo… Bueno, entonces os llevaré a la tómbola… Las niñas lo que quieren es jugar.

—Usted siempre nos toma el pelo, doctor… —exclamó Lisbeth Wöger—. Sabemos muy bien que un médico jefe de Estado Mayor no baila.

—¡Ah, Lisbeth, algún día me conocerás!

Y el médico jefe de Estado Mayor Kuhlenbeck cogió también del brazo a Lisbeth.

Cuando se hallaban ante la tómbola, llegó la señora Paulsen, esposa del farmacéutico Paulsen, la cual se apostó junto al médico jefe Kuhlenbeck y, con labios pálidos y apretados, musitó:

—¿No te da vergüenza?... ¡Estas todavía han de madurar!

Desde detrás de los quevedos, el gigante lanzó a su alrededor una mirada algo asustada.

—¡Oh, distinguida señora, a usted le tocará el mejor lote! —dijo luego.

—Gracias —dijo la señora Paulsen alejándose.

Lisbeth Wöger y Berta juntaron sus cabezas:

—¿Has visto qué ojos ponía ella?

Aunque la presencia de Heinrich había roto, hasta cierto punto, su vida de aislamiento, Hanna Wendling no había ido gustosa a la fiesta. Pero el abogado Wendling, sabiéndose un ciudadano importante y, además, siendo un oficial, se había sentido obligado a asistir. Así que acudieron en compañía de Röders.

Se sentaron en la sala; el doctor Kessel se sentó con ellos. En el lado más estrecho de la sala se encontraba la mesa de las personalidades, con mantel blanco y adornada con flores y guirnaldas; la presidían el alcalde y el mayor, y también el señor redactor Huguenau tenía allí su sitio. En cuanto este

último vio a los recién llegados, se dirigió hacia ellos. La insignia del comité lucía en su ojal, pero más aún lucía en su rostro la satisfacción. A nadie podía pasar inadvertida la dignidad del señor Huguenau. Naturalmente, Huguenau sabía a la perfección y desde hacía mucho tiempo a quién tenía delante: la señora del abogado Wendling había atraído su atención por la calle más de una vez, y el resto fue fácil de averiguar. Se detuvo junto al doctor Kessel:

—¿Puedo pedirle, querido doctor, que me haga el muy especial favor de presentarme a los señores?

Sí, podía.

—Es un verdadero honor, un gran honor, un honor especialísimo —dijo Huguenau—, un auténtico privilegio, distinguida señora. Vive usted tan retirada que, de no haberse producido la afortunada coincidencia de que su honorable marido se halle de permiso, a buen seguro que no hubiéramos tenido el placer de poder saludarla entre nosotros.

Hanna Wendling le respondió que la guerra la había vuelto poco sociable.

—Es injusto, señora. Precisamente en los tiempos difíciles debemos animarnos… Confío en que los señores se quedarán para el baile.

—Pues no, mi mujer está algo cansada y, por desgracia, tenemos que irnos pronto.

Huguenau se sintió francamente herido:

—Pero, señor abogado, para una vez que usted y su esposa nos otorgan el placer de su presencia… Una mujer tan hermosa que embellece nuestra fiesta… Es una fiesta benéfica, así que, por una sola vez, mi primer teniente, deberá hacer una excepción, cerrar los ojos y hacer como que no se entera.

Y aunque la señora Wendling veía con toda claridad la superficialidad de toda aquella palabrería, su rostro se iluminó con una sonrisa y dijo:

—De acuerdo, señor redactor jefe, en consideración a usted nos quedaremos un ratito más.

En medio del jardín habían instalado una larga mesa para los soldados y un barril de cerveza, sostenido por caballetes, obsequio de Gratitud Moselana. Ya hacía rato que la cerveza se había terminado; sin embargo, algunos de ellos todavía remoloneaban en torno a la mesa vacía. También Kneese se había unido otra vez al grupo y con la punta del dedo dibujaba figuras en los charquitos de cerveza de sobre la mesa.

—El doctor dice que hemos de violarlas.

—¿A quiénes?

—A las muchachas que rondan por aquí.

—Dile que empiece él y nosotros le imitaremos.

Risitas.

—Ya está a punto de hacerlo.

—Sería mejor que nos dejara volver con nuestras mujeres.

Los farolillos oscilaban en el aire de la noche.

Jaretzki deambula solo por el jardín. Al encontrarse con la señora Paulsen, hace una reverencia:

—Tan bella y sola, señora…

La señora Paulsen dice:

—Como usted, teniente.

—En mi caso, no tiene importancia, yo he renunciado a todo.

—¿Por qué no probamos suerte en la tómbola, teniente?

Huguenau se tropieza con el médico jefe de Estado Mayor Kuhlenbek, que pasea bajo los árboles en compañía de Lisbeth y de Berta. Huguenau saluda:

—Que se divierta, señor doctor; que se diviertan, señoritas.

Y desaparece.

El médico jefe de Estado Mayor Kuhlenbeck sigue sosteniendo con su enorme y cálida manaza la manita de uñas cortas de la muchachita burguesa:

—¿Os gusta ese joven tan elegante?

—En absoluto —dicen entre risitas las dos muchachas.

—¿Y por qué no?

—Hay otros…

—Por ejemplo, ¿quién?

Berta dice:

—Por allí viene el teniente Jaretzki paseando con la señora Paulsen.

—Déjala en paz —dice el médico jefe de Estado Mayor—, yo estoy contigo.

La música tocaba un aire militar. Huguenau se hallaba junto al director de la banda, sobre el estrado de los músicos, estrado que, por un lado, penetraba en la sala y, por el otro, se prolongaba sobre el jardín en forma de glorieta.

Huguenau, llevándose las manos a la boca a modo de bocina, gritó en dirección al jardín y por encima de las mesas:

—¡Silencio!

Tanto en la sala como en el jardín cesaron todas las voces.

—¡Silencio! —volvió a graznar Huguenau en medio del silencio.

El capitán Von Schnaack, de la sala VI, el que había sanado de un balazo en el pulmón, se reunió con él sobre el estrado y desdobló un papel:

—Victoria ante Amiens. Tres mil setecientos ingleses prisioneros, tres aviones enemigos derribados, dos de ellos por el capitán Bälcke, que con esta hazaña ha logrado su victoria aérea número veintitrés.

El capitán Von Schnaack levantó el brazo en alto:

—¡Viva, viva, viva!

La banda tocó el himno alemán. Todos se pusieron en pie. Casi todos cantaban. Cuando de nuevo se hizo el silencio, de un rincón oscuro salió una voz:

—¡Hurra, hurra, hurra, viva la guerra!

Todos se volvieron.

Allí estaba el teniente Jaretzki, sentado ante una botella de champán e intentando rodear con su brazo sano a la señora Paulsen.

Las paredes de la sala estaban adornadas con los retratos de los generales y de los soberanos aliados y con guirnaldas de hojas de roble y de papel; había banderas por doquier. La parte representativo-patriótica de la fiesta había concluido y Huguenau podía dedicarse a la diversión. Siempre había sido un buen bailarín; a pesar de sus anchas caderas, siempre había podido presumir de sus pasos y de sus figuras, pero ahora se trataba de algo más que de la elasticidad y la agilidad de un hombre bajo y rechoncho, porque aquí, ante las miradas de los generales del ejército, el baile se convertía en una danza de la victoria.

El bailarín se ve arrastrado lejos de este bajo mundo. Al fundirse con la música, ha renunciado a su libre albedrío y, sin embargo, actúa con una libertad más elevada y más lúcida. Bajo el rigor del ritmo que le guía, se siente protegido y, de esa protección, le brota una gran sensación de abandono. Así es como la música impone su unidad y su orden en la confusión y en el caos de la vida. Aboliendo el tiempo, hace desaparecer la muerte, aunque permite que esta resucite a cada compás, incluso cuando se trata de los compases insípidos e interminables del popurrí que están tocando en este momento, popurrí llamado *De todas las riberas de la música* y que, en sucesión multicolor, entremezcla aires del país con bailes enemigos como el *cake-walk*, la machicha y el tango. La dama del bailarín tararea y luego, animándose, canta. Y su voz, emocionada y sin cultivar, hace que las letras bárbaras, que ella domina sin excepción, se deslicen junto con su aliento por el rostro del bailarín cuando en el tango se inclina sobre ella. Pero el bailarín se yergue de nuevo; su mirada, que, a través de los cristales de las gafas, refleja un espíritu porfiado y severo, observa a su alrededor. Cuando la música se desborda en una marcha militar, las parejas que bailan porfían con las fuerzas enemigas, pero enseguida han de amoldarse al ritmo astuto y oscilante del *one-step*, meciéndose de un modo extraño, sin casi moverse del sitio, hasta que el tango envía sus ondulaciones y el paso se torna de nuevo suave y felino, flexibles la figura y la cintura. Al pasar ante la mesa de las autoridades, detrás de cuyos jarrones de flores están sentados el alcalde y el mayor, el bailarín coge, con el brazo curvado —él pertenece también a dicha mesa—, una copa y, sin interrumpir la danza, al igual que un funámbulo que, sonriendo y como quien no quiere la cosa, degusta en el aire un manjar suculento, bebe a la salud de todos los de la mesa.

Apenas dirige a su pareja; solo apoya una mano —galantemente envuelta en un pañuelo— sobre la delicada espalda, a la altura de la cintura; la mano izquierda pende inerte. Hasta que la música ataca el vals, no se cogen las manos, no se alzan los brazos ni, con los dedos fuertemente entrelazados, la pareja da vueltas y más vueltas describiendo un círculo. Si pasea la mirada por la sala, ve que las filas de los bailarines han disminuido. Además de ellos, únicamente otra pareja baila: se les acerca, casi les roza, vuelve a alejarse y se desliza a lo largo de la pared. Los demás se han unido a los espectadores; como no dominan estos bailes enemigos, se limitan a admirarlos. Si la música enmudece, tanto los espectadores como los bailarines aplauden y la música vuelve a sonar. Casi parece una competición. Huguenau no ve a su pareja que, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, se ha entregado a su brazo, brazo que la conduce con fuerza aunque de forma apenas perceptible; él no se da cuenta de que la música provoca en la dama un dulce y distendido magisterio del sexo, una feminidad de bacante que jamás conocerán ni el esposo ni el amante de la dama ni ella misma; tampoco ve la sonrisa extasiada con que la otra dama, enseñando las encías, se entrega a su pareja; él solo ve al hombre, a aquel bailarín enemigo, un corredor de vinos, muy

delgado, vestido de frac, con una corbata negra y la Cruz de Hierro en el pecho, un hombre cuya elegancia y distinción de héroe le eclipsan a él, a él que tan solo dispone de un traje azul. De ese modo, también el delgado Esch podría bailar aquí, y, a fin de robarle al otro su dama, cuando la otra pareja pasa junto a ellos, Huguenau clava en la bailarina su mirada, con tal intensidad que, al fin, aquella le responde con la mirada, se entrega a él con la mirada, de forma que él, Wilhelm Huguenau, posee ahora a las dos mujeres, las posee sin desearlas, porque a él no le interesa el favor de las mujeres aunque ahora lo solicite: no le interesa el placer erótico. Para él, tanto la fiesta como la espaciosa sala van concentrándose en torno a aquella mesa del mantel blanco, y sus pensamientos se centran en el mayor, sentado ahí, muy digno, con su barba blanca, mirándole desde detrás de las flores, mirándole a él, Wilhelm Huguenau, situado en el centro de la sala; él es el guerrero que danza frente a su jefe.

Pero la mirada del mayor refleja un horror progresivo. La sala, los dos hombres moviéndose desvergonzadamente, contoneándose sin pudor alguno, con menos pudor aún que las dos mujeres a ellos pegadas; todo ello es como una casa de mala nota, es el infierno. Y el hecho de que la guerra fuera acompañada de tales festejos de victoria hacía de la guerra misma una sangrante caricatura de depravación. Parecía que el mundo fuera a perder sus rasgos, abolido todo rasgo de cualquier faz, antro de lo indiscernible, cloaca de la que jamás podría surgir la salvación. Sobrecogido de espanto, el mayor Von Pasenow descubrió, extrañado, que lo que más deseaba él, un oficial prusiano, era arrancar las banderas de las paredes, y no porque pudieran ser profanadas por aquel horror, el horror de la fiesta, sino porque iban unidas a dicho horror y a aquella ostentación infernal de un modo inconcebible, desconcertante, y también porque detrás de todo se ocultaban la no caballerosidad de las armas impropias de caballeros, los amigos traidores y los pactos incumplidos. Y con una extraña, helada y espantosa calma, va surgiendo en él el deseo de aniquilar este engendro infernal, de destruirlo, de verlo enteramente destrozado bajo sus pies. Pero con idéntica calma, grandiosa como una cadena de montañas, semejante a la sombra de una alta cima, surge por encima del engendro la imagen del amigo, la imagen de Esch tal vez, grave y solemne, y al mayor Von Pasenow le parece como si, en honor a su amigo, tuviera que destruirse el mal y relegarlo a la nada. El mayor Von Pasenow añora, nostálgico, al hermano.

La enfermera Mathilde buscaba al médico jefe de Estado Mayor Kuhlenbeck. Lo halló sentado en el corro de los individuos de profesión respetable. Allí estaban el comerciante Kringel, el hotelero y carnicero Quint, el constructor Salzer, el director de correos Westrich… Sus mujeres e hijas estaban sentadas junto a ellos.

—Un momento, doctor.

—Otra mujer que me ha echado el ojo.

—Es solo un momento, doctor.

Kuhlenbeck se levantó:

—¿Qué sucede, hija mía?

—Tenemos que llevarnos al teniente Jaretzki…

—Bueno, seguramente ha bebido lo suyo.

La enfermera Mathilde sonrió asintiendo.

—Iré a verle.

Jaretzki, con el brazo sano apoyado en la mesa, había metido la cabeza en el hueco del mismo y dormía.

El médico jefe de Estado Mayor consultó el reloj:

—Flurschütz ha de venir a relevarme. Estará aquí con el coche de un momento a otro. Que se lo lleve.

—¿Se le puede dejar aquí, durmiendo así, doctor?

—No veo qué otra cosa podemos hacer. La guerra es la guerra.

Con los ojos algo irritados, el doctor Flurschütz parpadeó y recorrió con la mirada el jardín de la cervecería. Después entró en la sala. El mayor y las otras personalidades habían abandonado ya la fiesta. La larga mesa había sido retirada y la sala entera servía ahora de salón de baile, baile que proseguía sudoroso, apretado, arrastrándose, en una atmósfera llena de humo.

Tardó un rato en descubrir al médico jefe de Estado Mayor: con expresión seria y la barba apuntando al frente, Kuhlenbeck bailaba un vals con la esposa del farmacéutico Paulsen. Flurschütz aguardó a que concluyera el vals y entonces se acercó.

—Vaya, Flurschütz, por fin. Vea usted ante sí a su respetable superior, arrastrado a tan pueriles placeres por culpa de su negligente retraso… Pero no le servirá de nada: si el médico jefe baila, el ayudante del médico jefe ha de imitarle.

—Doctor jefe de Estado Mayor, me acuso de insubordinación: no bailaré.

—Y a eso se le llama juventud… Creo que yo soy más joven que todos ustedes… Pero, de momento, yo me voy; luego le enviaré el coche. Llévese a Jaretzki; está borracho como una cuba… Una de las dos enfermeras se vendrá conmigo, la otra irá con usted.

En el jardín descubrió a la enfermera Carla:

—Señorita Carla, me la llevo a usted con cuatro de los heridos en los pies. Prepárelos y *presto*!

Luego embarcó su cargamento. Tres hombres al fondo. La enfermera Carla y el cuarto hombre en la banqueta delantera, y él junto al chófer. Siete muletas brillaban en la oscuridad (la octava yacía en algún rincón del vehículo). Las estrellas pendían del negro entoldado. Olía a gasolina y a polvo. Pero de cuando en cuando, sobre todo en las curvas, se percibía la proximidad del bosque.

El teniente Jaretzki se levantó. Tenía la sensación de haberse dormido en el compartimiento de un tren. Y el tren se detenía ahora en una gran estación; Jaretzki quería ir a la cantina. En el andén había mucha gente y muchas luces. «Es el trajín de los domingos», se dijo Jaretzki. De pronto sintió frío. En el estómago. Algo caliente le sentaría bien. Súbitamente notó que le faltaba el brazo izquierdo. «Estará en la red de los equipajes.» Se abrió camino entre las mesas y la gente. Se detuvo ante el mostrador de la tómbola.

—Un grog —pidió autoritario.

—Me alegro de que esté usted aquí —dijo la enfermera Mathilde al doctor Flurschütz—, hoy tendremos problemas con Jaretzki.

—Los solucionaremos, señorita… ¿Qué, se ha divertido usted?

—¡Oh, sí! Ha estado muy bien.

—¿A usted no le parece también todo esto un tanto fantasmagórico?

La enfermera Mathilde intentó comprender; no respondió.

—Bueno, ¿acaso hubiera podido imaginarse antes algo parecido?

—Me recuerda nuestras fiestas mayores.

—Unas fiestas mayores algo histéricas.

—Sí, tal vez, doctor Flurschütz.

—Son formas vacías que todavía se mantienen… Parece una fiesta mayor, pero la gente ya no sabe qué le sucede.

—Las cosas volverán a su cauce, doctor.

Estaba allí, de pie ante él, sana, erguida. Flurschütz movió la cabeza:

—Nunca ha vuelto nada a su cauce y menos que nada el Juicio Final… Y esto parece algo así, ¿no?

—¡Qué cosas se le ocurren, doctor…! Ahora hemos de reunir a nuestros pacientes.

El desorientado Jaretzki fue detenido junto al quiosco de los músicos por el voluntario doctor Pelzer:

—Teniente, parece que busque usted urgentemente algo.

—Sí, un grog.

—Es una excelente idea, mi teniente, el invierno está empezando y yo voy a buscar un grog… Pero, mientras tanto, siéntese usted.

Se alejó corriendo y Jaretzki se sentó sobre la mesa, con las piernas colgando.

El doctor Wendling y su esposa, quienes se disponían a irse de la fiesta, pasaron junto a él. Jaretzki se cuadró:

—Con su permiso, mi teniente. Permítame que me presente: subteniente Jaretzki, batallón de cazadores de Hesse número ocho, ejército del príncipe heredero; brazo izquierdo perdido en Armentières por culpa de los gases vesicantes.

Wendling le miró extrañado:

—Encantado —respondió—; primer teniente doctor Wendling.

—Ingeniero diplomado Otto Jaretzki —se sintió este obligado a añadir, cuadrándose también ante Hanna para dar a entender que hacía su presentación extensiva a ella.

Hanna Wendling ya había visto hoy muchas cosas de las que sorprenderse.

—Es terrible lo del brazo —dijo con tono amable.

—En efecto, señora mía, terrible, pero justo.

—Vamos, vamos, querido camarada —dijo Wendling—, no se puede hablar de justicia en un caso así.

Jaretzki levantó un dedo:

—No se trata de justicia jurídica, camarada superior… Tenemos ahora una justicia nueva, ¿de qué le sirven al hombre tantas extremidades si está solo…? Admitirá usted que tengo razón, querida señora.

—Buenas noches —dijo Wendling.

—Es una pena, una verdadera pena —dijo Jaretzki—, pero es natural, cada uno se debe a su soledad… Buenas noches, señor; buenas noches, señora.

Y se vuelve de nuevo hacia la mesa.

—Qué hombre tan curioso —dice Hanna Wendling.

—Un loco borracho —responde su marido.

El voluntario Pelzer se acerca con dos vasos de grog y se cuadra al pasar.

Huguenau salía a toda prisa de la sala de baile, limpiándose el sudor de la frente y metiéndose el pañuelo por dentro del cuello.

La enfermera Mathilde lo detuvo:

—Señor Huguenau, usted podría ayudarnos a reunir a nuestros pacientes.

—Será un honor, distinguida señorita, ¿hago que toquen a rebato? —preguntó, dirigiéndose ya hacia los músicos.

—No, no, señor Huguenau, no hace falta tanto ruido…

—Como guste… Hermosa fiesta, ¿verdad, señorita? También el mayor ha manifestado su complacencia.

—Desde luego, una fiesta muy hermosa.

—El médico jefe de Estado Mayor también parecía satisfecho… Estaba de excelente humor… ¿Puedo pedirle que le presente usted mis respetos? Se ha ido tan aprisa que no he podido acompañarle hasta la puerta.

—Por favor, señor Huguenau, advierta usted a los soldados que están en el baile que el doctor Flurschütz y yo les esperamos en la entrada.

—Enseguida, con mucho gusto… Pero no está bien que nos deje usted tan pronto, querida señorita… ¡Ojalá no quiera eso decir que no se ha divertido! No quiero ni pensarlo…

Con el pañuelo en el cuello todavía, Huguenau regresó muy deprisa a la sala de baile.

—¿Y los oficiales? —preguntó Flurschütz a la enfermera.

—No tenemos por qué preocuparnos, ya se habrán ocupado ellos de conseguirse algún medio de transporte.

—Bien, parece que todo vuelve a su cauce… Pero de Jaretzki no nos libra nadie.

Jaretzki y el voluntario Pelzer seguían sentados en el jardín, al pie del quiosco de los músicos. Jaretzki intentaba ver los faroles a través del oscuro vaso de grog.

Flurschütz se sentó junto a ellos:

—¿Qué tal si nos fuéramos a dormir, Jaretzki?

—Me iré a dormir con una mujer, no quiero acostarme sin una mujer… Así empezó todo: acostándose los hombres sin mujeres y las mujeres sin hombres… Y estuvo mal.

—En eso lleva razón —dijo el voluntario.

—Es posible —dijo Flurschütz—. ¿Y se le acaba de ocurrir ahora, Jaretzki?

—Ahora mismo, sí… Pero lo sabía desde hace mucho tiempo.

—Y con semejante idea salvará usted al mundo.

—Con que salvara a Alemania bastaría —dijo el voluntario Pelzer.

—Alemania… —dijo Flurschütz mirando hacia el vacío jardín.

—Alemania… —dijo Pelzer—. Me alisté voluntario muy contento… Pero ahora me alegro de estar aquí.

—Alemania… —dijo Jaretzki echándose a llorar—… demasiado tarde —se secó los ojos con la mano —. Flurschütz, es usted un chico estupendo, le quiero mucho.

—Es usted muy amable, yo también le quiero… ¿Nos vamos ahora a casa?

—Ya no tenemos casa, Flurschütz… Intentaré casarme.

—También para eso es demasiado tarde hoy —dijo el voluntario.

—Sí, es tarde, Jaretzki —dijo Flurschütz.

—Para eso nunca es demasiado tarde —sollozó Jaretzki—. Tú me cortaste el brazo, cerdo.

—Bueno, Jaretzki, ya va siendo hora de que despierte usted…

—Tú me lo cortas a mí y yo te lo corto a ti… Por eso la guerra ha de continuar eternamente… ¿Has probado alguna vez tu habilidad con una granada de mano? —y afirmando muy en serio con la cabeza—: yo sí, yo he hecho la prueba… Qué huevos tan delicados las granadas de mano… huevos podridos.

Flurschütz le cogió del brazo:

—Sí, Jaretzki, incluso es posible que tenga usted razón… Sí, probablemente es el único medio de

entenderse, pero ahora venga usted, amigo mío.

En la entrada, los soldados estaban ya reunidos en torno a la enfermera Mathilde.

—Compostura, Jaretzki.

—A la orden —dijo Jaretzki, y al llegar frente a la enfermera Mathilde se cuadró y dio el parte—: Un teniente, un adjunto del médico jefe y catorce hombres en sus puestos… Comunico respetuosamente que él me cortó el… —Hizo una pequeña pausa para llamar la atención, luego sacó del bolsillo la manga vacía y la agitó varias veces ante la larga nariz de la enfermera Mathilde—: Casta y vacía.

La enfermera Mathilde gritó:

—Los que quieran ir en coche, que suban; yo iré a pie con los demás.

Huguenau salió precipitadamente de la sala:

—Espero que todo haya ido bien, señorita… Todos estamos… Me permite desearles un feliz regreso…

Se despidió de la enfermera Mathilde, del doctor Flurschütz, del teniente Jaretzki y de cada uno de los catorce hombres presentándose siempre: Huguenau.

XLI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 10

¿Cuáles son en realidad mis intenciones respecto a Marie? La invito, le pido que cante, la junto castamente con Nuchem el talmudista, el talmudista apóstata debería decir, y la dejo partir luego hacia las grises regiones de su hospicio. ¿Qué es lo que me propongo respecto a ella? Y ¿por qué se presta ella a este juego? ¿Quiere salvar mi alma? ¿Pretende llevar a cabo la imposible, la infinita tarea de pescar al vuelo el alma talmúdica del judío para conducirla hasta Jesús? En apariencia, tenía en mis manos a dos personas de las que no sé nada en absoluto, ni sé lo que piensan ni lo que comerán esta noche. La soledad del ser humano es tan grande que nadie, ni siquiera Dios que lo ha creado, sabe nada de él.

El asunto me inquietaba de un modo extraordinario, tanto más cuanto que solo era capaz de imaginarme a Marie como un ser lleno todo él de cánticos y de sentencias bíblicas, y en mi inquietud, me encaminé al hospicio.

Tuve que ir dos veces para encontrarla. Salía a visitar a los enfermos y no regresaba hasta tarde. Así pues, sentado en la sala de visitas, observaba los versículos bíblicos de la pared, el retrato del general Booth, y me replanteaba una vez más todas las posibilidades. Recordé mi primer encuentro con Marie, el posterior encuentro fortuito con Nuchem y todo lo que había ocurrido desde entonces; lo grababa en mi mente con toda exactitud, sin olvidar la actual situación; miraba con atención suma la sala de visitas y me paseaba por ella mientras iba oscureciendo poco a poco, porque el tiempo se había nublado; fuera comenzaron a caer gruesas gotas y acabó por oscurecer con rapidez. Me pregunté si debía incluir en mi memoria a los dos viejos que, al igual que yo, estaban sentados en la sala, y así lo hice: lo seguro es lo seguro. Estaban muy cansados, sus pensamientos resultaban impenetrables, yo era viento para ellos.

Era ya muy tarde cuando por fin llegó Marie. Entretanto, se habían llevado a los viejos y yo casi tuve miedo de que hicieran lo mismo conmigo. Como la habitación estaba muy mal iluminada, de momento no me reconoció.

—Dios le bendiga —dijo.

—Es solo un símbolo.

Entonces me reconoció y repuso:

—No es un símbolo, ¡ojalá Dios le bendiga!

—Entre nosotros los judíos, todo son símbolos.

—Pero usted no es judío.

—Tan símbolo es esto como el pan y el vino —le respondí—, además, vivo entre judíos.

—Nuestro hogar está siempre en el Señor.

Era lo que yo esperaba, como yo me la imaginaba: con una cita religiosa para todo. Ahora la tenía de nuevo entre las manos, y alcé la voz:

—Le prohíbo que vuelva a poner jamás los pies en mi vivienda judía.

Pero sonó a hueco; para hablar razonablemente con ella, me era preciso tenerla de nuevo en mi casa, así que me reí y dije:

—Es broma, *nebbich*, es broma.

Y, sin embargo, por mucho que intentara refugiarme en palabras extrañas en detrimento de las mías, en las palabras de un pueblo de otra raza, poniéndome bajo el amparo de un Dios ajeno, no me servía de nada, no volvía a hallar mi seguridad. Tal vez la espera me había desmoralizado, me había envejecido como a los dos ancianos que se habían llevado de la sala de visitas: la espera me había denigrado, me había convertido de creador en criatura: un dios destronado. Me sentí obligado a decir casi humildemente:

—Quería preservarla del Mal. El doctor Litwak me advirtió de los peligros.

De todos modos, aquello era alterar los hechos, ya que el doctor en cuestión solo temía los peligros que pudiera correr Nuchem. ¡E invocar como garantía a un ridículo semilibre pensador como aquel! En verdad que yo no hubiera podido infligir a mi propia conciencia una herida más profunda. Y, por muy sencillas que fueran sus palabras, su respuesta sonó como una reprimenda:

—El que vive en la alegría está a salvo del peligro.

Ante esta humillación, perdí la paciencia y ni siquiera me di cuenta de que iba a defender los intereses del abuelo y del doctor Litwak:

—No debes continuar con el joven judío; tiene una mujer gorda y muchos hijos.

¡Oh, si hubiera podido leer en su alma y saber si mis palabras la habían herido o extrañado, saber si había lastimado aquel corazón que decía vivir en la alegría! Pero no dejó traslucir nada, tal vez no me había comprendido.

—Quiero ir a su casa. Cantaremos juntos —dijo simplemente.

Me di por vencido.

—Podemos ir ahora mismo —dije con un resto de esperanza, esperanza de poder determinar su camino a pesar de todo.

—Me encantaría, pero debo volver con mis enfermos.

Así que me vi obligado a regresar a casa con las manos absolutamente vacías. La lluvia caía ahora despacio. Delante de mí iba una pareja de enamorados; caminaban cogidos del brazo moviendo al compás de sus pasos el que les quedaba libre.

XLII

Degradación de los valores 8

Las religiones surgen de las sectas y vuelven a desmoronarse en sectas, vuelven a su origen antes de disolverse del todo. En los primeros tiempos del cristianismo, existían el culto a Jesús y el de Mitra; al final del cristianismo, están las grotescas sectas americanas, está el Ejército de Salvación.

El protestantismo es la primera gran secta nacida de la decadencia cristiana. Una secta, no una nueva religión, puesto que le falta la característica más importante de una nueva religión: una teología nueva, una teología que amalgame la nueva cosmogonía con la nueva vivencia de Dios, hasta formar una nueva unidad universal. Pero el protestantismo, de acuerdo con su esencia no deductiva y no teológica, se negó abandonar el ámbito de la interna vivencia de Dios.

Si bien la renovación kantiana, como teología protestante retrasada, asumió la tarea de conferir al nuevo contenido positivista-científico un valor intrínseco platónico-religioso, se hallaba muy lejos de alcanzar una totalidad de valores conforme al modelo católico.

La defensa contra la progresiva desintegración del catolicismo en sectas fue organizada por los jesuitas de la Contrarreforma mediante una centralización de valores draconiana, casi militar. Fue la época en que incluso los restos de las antiguas costumbres paganas fueron puestos al servicio de la Iglesia; fue la época en que el arte popular experimentó una orientación católica, en que la iglesia de los jesuitas desplegó una pompa nunca superada antes, y ello en pos de una unidad estética que, si bien ya no era aquella unidad impregnada de símbolos del gótico, era, no obstante, su contrapartida romántico-heroica.

Frente a su progresiva desintegración en sectas, el protestantismo tenía que prescindir de tal defensa. Su relación con los ámbitos de valores extrarreligiosos no es la de la integración sino la de la tolerancia. Rechaza la «ayuda» extrarreligiosa, porque su exigencia ascética se refiere a la interioridad radical de la vivencia de Dios. Y, aunque para el protestantismo el valor extático constituía la base fundamental y el sentido supremo de lo religioso, este valor debía conseguirse, con un rigor absoluto, de un modo puro, sin roturas, de forma autónoma, partiendo del ámbito de los valores religiosos.

El protestantismo regula sus relaciones con los ámbitos de valores terrenales extrarreligiosos según un criterio rigorista e intenta asegurar su estabilidad terrenal y eclesiástica con ayuda de esas relaciones. Orientado pura e inequívocamente hacia Dios, se encamina de modo necesario hacia la única emanación terrenal-espiritual que de Dios existe: hacia las Sagradas Escrituras, y la trabazón con las Escrituras se eleva hasta el supremo deber terrenal al que son transferidos todo el radicalismo y todo el rigor del método protestante.

El pensamiento protestante: el imperativo categórico del deber. Su contraste total con el catolicismo: los valores vitales externos no son incorporados a la fe, no son canonizados por la teología sino que, simplemente, son vigilados con rigor y con prosaísmo, de la mano de las Escrituras.

Si el protestantismo hubiera seguido la otra vía, la vía del catolicismo, a fin de llegar por su cuenta a un *organon* de valores protestante —como por ejemplo intentó hacer Leibniz—, no se habría protegido con menos eficacia que el catolicismo contra una progresiva desmembración en sectas, pero habría tenido que renunciar necesariamente a su propia esencia. Se encontraba, y se encuentra, en la misma situación que un partido revolucionario que, habiendo adoptado los mismos recursos autoritarios que el viejo y por él combatido Estado, corre el peligro de tener que identificarse con dicho Estado. El reproche de criptocatolicismo dirigido contra Leibniz no estaba del todo injustificado.

No existe rigorismo alguno tras el cual no se oculte el miedo. Pero el miedo a desintegrarse en sectas sería un motivo demasiado insignificante para justificar el rigorismo protestante. Y la huida en pos de la fidelidad a la letra escrita, la huida hacia las Escrituras, está preñada de angustia divina, de la angustia que surge de la *poenitentia* de Lutero, la angustia «absoluta» ante la crueldad de lo absoluto vivida por Kierkegaard y en la que Dios «impera guardando luto».

Parece como si el protestantismo, al atarse a las Escrituras, quisiera conservar el último aliento del lenguaje de Dios en un mundo donde el lenguaje de las cosas había enmudecido, un mundo sumido en el mutismo y en la crueldad de lo absoluto, y en su angustia divina, el hombre protestante se dio cuenta de que lo que le horrorizaba era su propia meta. Porque con la desconexión de todos los ámbitos de valores, con el retorno radical a la autónoma vivencia de Dios, se adopta una última abstracción cuyo rigorismo lógico empuja inequívocamente a la abolición de todo artículo de fe religioso-terrenal, a un despojamiento absoluto de todo contenido, dejando como única posibilidad la forma pura, una forma pura vacía de contenido, la forma neutra de una «religión en sí», de una «mística en sí».

Es sorprendente la similitud con la estructura religiosa del judaísmo; tal vez se haya efectuado un proceso de neutralización de la vivencia divina, el despojamiento de todo lo terrenal o afectivo del misticismo, la eliminación progresiva de la ayuda extática «externa»; tal vez se haya alcanzado una aproximación —apenas soportable para el hombre terrenal— al frío de lo absoluto, pero también en este punto se impone, como un último resto de ligamiento a lo religioso-terrenal, el rigorismo total de la Ley.

Esta similitud en el proceso de interiorización, esta concordancia de las formas exteriores de la fe, cuyos efectos se extienden incluso hasta la similitud, con tanta frecuencia afirmada, existente entre determinados rasgos de carácter de los judíos ortodoxos y de los suizos calvinistas o de los puritanos ingleses, esta concordancia podría retrotraerse, naturalmente, a una determinada semejanza de situaciones externas: el protestantismo como movimiento revolucionario y el judaísmo como minoría oprimida constituyen ambos dos fuerzas de oposición, e incluso podría afirmarse que un catolicismo en situación de minoría, como por ejemplo el de Irlanda, presenta los mismos rasgos esenciales. Pero un catolicismo de tal índole tiene tan poco en común con el romano como las primitivas ideas protestantes con las tendencias romanas del seno de la High Church. Siempre se ha producido una alteración de signo. Pero, se planteen como se planteen, los hechos empíricos de este tipo poseen un valor aclaratorio muy escaso, ya que estos hechos no existirían si detrás de ellos no existiera la vivencia de Dios, que es decisiva.

¿Es esta religiosidad muda, radical y carente de ornamentación, esta infinitud del rigorismo solo sometida al rigorismo, lo que constituye el estilo de la nueva época? ¿La manifestación del punto de plausibilidad

retrocedido hasta el infinito radica en esta rigurosidad de lo divino? ¿En esta pulverización total del contenido terrenal hay que ver la raíz de la desintegración de los valores? Sí.

El judío, en virtud del rigorismo abstracto de su idea del infinito, es el hombre moderno, el hombre «más progresista», el hombre por excelencia: él es quien se entrega con absoluto radicalismo al campo de los valores o al profesional, una vez elegidos; él es quien eleva a un grado absoluto, hasta ahora desconocido, la «profesión», el trabajo productivo al que ha ido a parar por casualidad; él es quien, sin atarse a ningún otro ámbito de valores y totalmente entregado a sus actos con un rigor absoluto, se sublima hasta la más elevada tarea espiritual y se hunde en lo material hasta la depravación más brutal. En lo bueno y en lo malo, está siempre en los extremos. Es como si la corriente de lo abstracto absoluto que, imperceptiblemente y desde hace dos mil años, ha circulado como un arroyuelo del gueto junto a la gran corriente de la vida, debiera convertirse en la corriente principal, como si el radicalismo del pensamiento protestante hubiera tornado virulento todo lo que de horrible posee la abstracción que, a lo largo de dos milenios, había sido confiada a la protección de lo más modesto y había sido reducida al mínimo; es como si el tradicionalismo del pensamiento protestante se hubiera desprendido, de forma explosiva, de la capacidad absoluta de expansión que convive, potencialmente, con la abstracción pura y radica solo en ella, a fin de que el tiempo estallara y el modesto guardián del pensamiento se convirtiera en encarnación paradigmática de la época que se desintegra.

Aparentemente, para el hombre cristiano solo existen dos posibilidades: o bien la protección, todavía existente de un modo eventual, en el seno del valor universal católico, en el verdadero regazo maternal de la Iglesia o bien tener el valor de asumir, con un protestantismo absoluto, el horror frente al Dios abstracto; y allí donde esta decisión no haya sido tomada, pesará la angustia ante el futuro. De hecho, en todos los países donde se da esta indecisión, la angustia se halla de continuo en el ambiente, existe de forma latente, aunque solo se exprese a través del horror por el judío, por el judío cuyo espíritu y forma de vida son interpretados, aunque no se reconozca así, como la odiada imagen del futuro.

En la idea de un *organon* de valores protestantes aletea sin duda la nostalgia de una reunificación de toda la cristiandad, de aquella reunificación anhelada por Leibniz. El hecho de que Leibniz, que abarcaba los ámbitos de valores todos de su época, fuera impelido a ella, se considera casi como una necesidad, pero también se considera que Leibniz, que se adelantó en siglos a su tiempo, y que intuyó la *lingua universalis* de la lógica, tuvo que pensar, dentro de aquella última unión, en la abstracción de una *religio universalis* cuya frialdad tal vez solo él era capaz de soportar, él, el místico más profundo del protestantismo. Pero la directriz protestante exigía, en primer lugar, la pulverización de todo; no fue la filosofía de Leibniz la que se convirtió en teología protestante, sino la de Kant, y es muy significativo que el redescubrimiento de Leibniz fuera obra de los teólogos católicos.

Las numerosas sectas que en lo sucesivo fueron desprendiéndose del protestantismo, y que fueron toleradas por este con la aparente tolerancia propia de todo movimiento revolucionario, se mueven también en la misma dirección; son calcos estereotipados, atrofias, achatamientos del antiguo pensamiento del *organon* de valores protestante; son «contrarreformistas» (y eso sin citar las grotescas sectas americanas). El Ejército de Salvación, por ejemplo, no solo es una imitación del militarismo jesuita de la Contrarreforma sino que, con toda claridad, muestra una tendencia a la centralización de los valores, a la concentración de todos los ámbitos de valores, y a que todo el arte popular y, en el último peldaño de la escala, la bulla callejera, haya de ser reconducido a lo religioso e incluido en el programa de «ayudas extáticas». Emocionante e insuficiente esfuerzo.

Emocionante e insuficiente esfuerzo, esperanza falaz de salvar el pensamiento protestante del horror de lo Absoluto. Emocionante llamada de socorro, llamada a las «fuerzas auxiliadoras» de una comunidad divina, aunque esta solo pueda ser sentida como una estereotipada copia de la gran comunidad que existió una vez. Porque el mutismo, la crueldad, la neutralidad se perfilan ya ante las puertas con todo su rigorismo, y aquellos que no son capaces de asumir el peso del futuro elevan su llamada de auxilio con más fuerza cada vez.

La tarde del domingo siguiente a la fiesta en la Stadthalle, el mayor Von Pasenow decidió, para su propia sorpresa, aceptar la invitación de Esch y acudir a la charla bíblica. Sucedió así: a decir verdad, ni se acordaba de Esch, y de su decisión tuvo simplemente la culpa el bastón de paseo que vio de pronto apoyado contra la arandela del guardarropa, un bastón de blanca empuñadura de marfil que de algún modo había ido a parar al armario y que, evidentemente, en el armario había permanecido oculto hasta ahora. Como es natural hacía mucho tiempo que conocía aquel bastón, y, sin embargo, no le era familiar. Durante unos instantes, al mayor Von Pasenow le pareció inevitable vestirse de paisano e ir a uno de aquellos establecimientos dudosos donde no pueden entrar los oficiales vestidos de uniforme. Y, por así decirlo, no se ciñó la espada, pero, con un gesto aproximado, tomó el bastón y salió del hotel. Se quedó un momento dudando ante la casa y, luego, decidió encaminarse hacia el río. Caminaba despacio, apoyándose en el bastón, como un oficial herido o enfermo en un centro de recuperación. De repente, sin poderlo evitar, pensó que al bastón le faltaba una contera de goma. Así, con pasos reposados, llegó al extremo de la ciudad, y tenía la pequeña sensación de libertad del hombre que en todo momento puede volver sobre sus pasos, del oficial de permiso. Y, en efecto, al cabo de un momento dio la vuelta —fue como si hubiera hallado el camino de regreso al hogar: una sensación grata, tranquilizadora y, pese a todo, inquietante— y, como quien ha de cumplir con urgencia una promesa, se dirigió a casa de Esch por el camino más corto.

Como el número de adheridos había aumentado —y, de todos modos, en aquella época del año no se necesitaba calefacción—, las reuniones se celebraban en uno de los almacenes vacíos de la antigua alquería. Un carpintero, que formaba parte del cenáculo, había aportado unos sencillos bancos; en medio de la estancia se veía una mesita con su silla. A falta de ventana, se dejaba abierta la puerta, así que el mayor, al entrar en el patio, supo de inmediato hacia dónde tenía que dirigirse.

Cuando el mayor apareció en el umbral de la puerta, donde se detuvo un instante para habituar sus ojos a la penumbra, todos se pusieron en pie; daba casi la sensación de que estuvieran esperando a un superior que venía a inspeccionar el cuartel (impresión esta reforzada por el uniforme de los militares presentes). Para el mayor, este salto retrospectivo a una dignidad para él más habitual, aunque solo fuera simbólico, suavizó lo insólito de la situación; parecía como si una mano suave, pero firme, le impidiera precipitarse por un camino oscuro, parecía como si intuyera un peligro fugaz, y saludó.

Esch se levantó al mismo tiempo que los demás y acompañó al visitante hasta la silla de detrás de la mesa. Se quedó a su lado, de pie, en cierto modo como un ángel llegado para custodiarle. Y el mayor sintió algo parecido. En efecto, era como si con ello se hubiera cumplido ya el objeto de su visita, como si le rodeara una atmósfera de seguridad, un espacio vital simplificado y dispuesto a acogerle como a un hijo pródigo. También el silencio que le rodeaba era un fin en sí mismo (hubiera podido durar eternamente). Nadie pronunció una sola palabra; la estancia, llena de silencio, extrañamente vacía a causa del silencio, parecía salirse de sus propios límites, y la dorada luz solar que iluminaba la abierta entrada fluía como una corriente eterna e inconmensurable a cuya ribera se hubieran sentado. Nadie sabía cuánto duraría aquella inmutabilidad silenciosa. Era como la petrificada indecisión del instante en que la muerte se sitúa junto al hombre y, aunque el mayor sabía que quien estaba a su lado era Esch, sintió en su ánimo la fraternidad absoluta de la muerte, sintió la amenaza como un dulce apoyo. Y al intentar volverse hacia Esch, lo hizo con el mismo esfuerzo de quien espera algo decisivo, pero que, no obstante, sabe que debe mantener las formas hasta el último instante. Con un supremo esfuerzo se volvió hacia él y le dijo:

—Por favor, continúen.

Pero a continuación no sucedió nada en absoluto, ya que Esch se quedó mirando el blanco cabello del mayor, y fue como si el mayor lo supiera todo respecto a él, como si él lo supiera todo respecto al mayor: como dos amigos que saben mucho el uno del otro. Allí estaban él y el mayor, como sobre un escenario elevado e iluminado, ocupando el sitio de honor; la asamblea permanecía silenciosa como si una campanilla hubiera impuesto silencio, y Esch, no atreviéndose a poner su mano sobre el hombro del mayor, se apoyó en el respaldo de la silla, aunque esto fuera también una falta de respeto. Se sentía fuerte, con los pies firmes y seguro, tan fuerte como en los mejores años de su juventud, protegido y relajado a la vez, como liberado de toda acción humana, como si la estancia ya no constara de hileras de ladrillos ni la puerta de tablas aserradas, como si todo fuera obra de Dios y las palabras que brotaban de sus labios fueran las palabras de Dios. Abrió la Biblia y leyó el capítulo 16 de *Los Hechos de los Apóstoles*: «Y súbitamente se sintió un terremoto tan grande que se movieron los cimientos de la cárcel: y se abrieron luego todas las puertas, y fueron sueltas las prisiones de todos. Y habiendo despertado el carcelero, cuando vio abiertas las puertas de la cárcel, desenvainó la espada, y se quería matar, pensando que habían huido los presos. Mas Pablo clamó en voz alta, diciendo: “No te hagas ningún mal, porque todos estamos aquí”».

Con los dedos entre las páginas del libro cerrado, Esch carraspeó con discreción y aguardó. Esperaba que temblasen los cimientos del edificio, esperaba que se produjera un gran acontecimiento, esperaba que aquel hombre diera la orden de izar la bandera negra, y pensó: «He de ceder el sitio a aquel cuyo advenimiento inaugurará una nueva era». Pensó esto y aguardó. No obstante, para el mayor, las palabras que acaba de oír eran como gotas heladas durante su caída: guardó silencio y todos callaron con él.

—Toda huida carece de sentido —dijo Esch—, debemos asumir la cautividad voluntariamente… El invisible está con su espada a nuestras espaldas.

Tal y como el mayor había imaginado, Esch había interpretado la cita bíblica exactamente, en parte, y de acuerdo con su significado, pero, en parte también, de forma oscura y fastidiosa en suma. Mas el anciano no se detuvo a pensarlo, sino que se sumió en una imagen que, parecida a un recuerdo, no era sin embargo recuerdo alguno, ya que lo veía todo ante sí de la forma más viva: los viejos de la última reserva y los jóvenes reclutas eran como apóstoles y discípulos, como una comunidad reunida en un almacén de verduras o en un panteón oscuro, hablando una oscura lengua extranjera —comprensible, sin embargo, como el lenguaje de los niños—, bañados por una plateada nube celestial, y los discípulos, llenos de un decidido fervor y con la misma confianza que le animaba a él, elevaban sus ojos hacia la celeste aparición.

—Vamos a cantar —dijo Esch, y empezó:

Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos,
acógenos en tu gracia,
cíñenos con tu lazo de unidad,
con tu mano guíanos,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.

Esch marcaba el compás golpeando con la punta de la bota; muchos hacían lo mismo: se balanceaban siguiendo el ritmo y cantaban. Tal vez el Mayor se unió al canto, no lo sabía; el canto se producía más bien en su interior: un canto tras los ojos cerrados, gotas cristalinas que, cantando, caen de la nube. Y oyó la voz: «No te hagas ningún mal, porque todos estamos aquí».

Esch dejó que el canto se extinguiera y luego dijo:

—De nada sirve huir de las tinieblas de la prisión, pues solo huimos hacia nuevas tinieblas… Cuando haya llegado la hora, tendremos que edificar la casa de nuevo.

Una voz reanudó el canto:

Aviva su llama para que arda
en fuego de púrpura,
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.

—Cierra el pico —dijo otra voz.

Y una voz más próxima respondió:

¡*Bautízanos con fuego, Jesús,*
envíanos el fuego!
Este fuego es nuestro privilegio,
¡*envíanos el fuego*!
Señor y Dios nuestro, te imploramos:
¡*envíanos el fuego*!
Solo entonces estará todo bien hecho.
¡*Envíanos el fuego*!

—Cierra el pico —repitió la voz de antes, una voz pastosa y amenazadora como una bóveda subterránea; era la voz de un hombre vestido con el uniforme de los reservistas; llevaba una larga barba y estaba de pie, apoyado en dos bastones. Y, pese a lo mucho que le costaba hablar, prosiguió:

—Aquel que no ha muerto, ha de cerrar la boca… Aquel que ha muerto ha sido bautizado, los demás no.

Pero también el otro cantor se había puesto en pie y respondía cantando:

Sálvame, ¡oh, sálvame de la muerte!
Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos.

«Envíanos el fuego», dijo también el mayor, y lo dijo en voz muy baja, pero no tanto que Esch no lo oyera y se inclinara sobre él. En cierto modo fue una inclinación inmaterial, al menos así se lo pareció al mayor; había una ligera seguridad en aquel acercamiento, una seguridad tranquilizadora —y el mayor contempló la empuñadura de marfil del bastón, colocado sobre la mesita frente a él y observó los dos blancos puños que asomaban por las bocamangas del uniforme—; era una tranquilidad en cierto modo inmaterial, una tranquilidad como atenuada, diáfana, blanca; era la misma tranquilidad que se extendía por la estancia en penumbra y por encima del laberinto de las voces; como una red sonora y transparente, simplificación curiosamente abstracta. Fuera, la corriente de luz solar fluía como una muralla de fuego; se hallaban en un puerto, una cava, una cueva, una catacumba.

Esch esperaba tal vez que el mayor continuara hablando, pues levantó la mano por dos veces, siguiendo el ritmo del canto y para saludar, y Esch retuvo el aliento, pero el mayor dejó caer la mano de nuevo. Entonces Esch, como si así fuera a resucitar lo vivo de lo muerto, dijo:

—La antorcha de la libertad… El fuego que ilumina… La antorcha de la auténtica libertad…

Pero al mayor le pareció que todo se fundía ahora, y no habría sabido decir si veía sobre sí el círculo luminoso de la antorcha o si oía la voz del hombre que continuaba salmodiando «envíanos tu fuego», o si, por el contrario, era la voz de Esch, o la del pequeño relojero Samwald la que se oía ahora, como un sollozo, procedente del fondo de la sala: «Sálvanos de las tinieblas, condúcenos a las alegrías del Paraíso».

El reservista, que se había levantado respirando con dificultad, esgrimió uno de sus bastones, emitió roncos sonidos y dijo sollozante:

—Resucitó de entre los muertos… El que no ha estado bajo tierra ha de cerrar el pico.

Esch, al reírse, mostró su dentadura caballuna:

—También tú podrías cerrar tu sucia boca, Gödicke.

Eran unas palabras groseras; el propio Esch se vio forzado a reírse hasta que la garganta se le estranguló, como le sucede a quien se ríe mientras duerme. De todos modos, el mayor no percibió la grosería del lenguaje ni lo ruidoso de la risa, pues, con su profundo conocimiento del alma humana, iba más allá de la vulgar apariencia, apariencia que ni tan siquiera veía, y le pareció más bien que Esch podía restablecer el orden con su mano suave, que los rasgos de Esch, casi irreconocibles en la penumbra, se habían fundido con el paisaje, extrañamente crepuscular, y con toda la estancia. Y, a través de aquella risa estentórea, vio brillar un alma, un alma que, sonriente, se asomaba a la ventana de la casa vecina, al alma del hermano, pero no el alma universal, no el prójimo todo, sino algo semejante a una patria infinitamente lejana. Y sonrió a Esch. Pero también Esch poseía aquel profundo conocimiento y, al igual que él, sabía que una sonrisa común los elevaba a los dos a un plano superior, y tuvo la impresión de que acababa de llegar de la más remota lejanía en medio de un viento huracanado, viento que barría todo cuanto había existido; le parecía llegar sobre un carro de fuego purpúreo para alcanzar aquí su meta, la elevada meta en la que ya nada importa el nombre de cada uno o que uno se funda en otro, meta en la que ya no existen ni el hoy ni el mañana. Sintió el hálito de la libertad rozándole la frente, sueño en el seno del sueño, y Esch, desabotonándose la chaqueta, se irguió en toda su altura, como disponiéndose a poner el pie en la escalinata del castillo.

Cierto que, con todo, no logró intimidar a Ludwig Gödicke hombre. Este se había acercado cojeando hasta la mesita y, buscando pelea, gritó:

—El que quiera hablar ha de empezar por enterrarse bajo tierra… ahí… —clavó la punta de su bastón en el suelo arcilloso, como si fuera una barrena— ahí… Ya puedes empezar por enterrarte un poco ahí.

Esch no pudo evitar reírse de nuevo. Se sentía fuerte, en posición ventajosa, firme sobre sus pies, un tipo al que no sería inútil asesinar. Extendió los brazos como quien se desespera o como un crucificado:

—¿Qué, vas a atravesarme… con tus muletas? Porque tú usas muletas, aborto de la naturaleza.

No faltó quienes gritaran que dejase en paz a Gödicke, que era un santo.

Esch hizo un gesto despectivo con la mano:

—No hay nadie santo… Solo es santo el Hijo que construirá la casa.

—Soy yo quien construye las casas —rugió el albañil Gödicke—, todas las casas las he construido yo… Cada vez más altas —y escupió con desprecio.

—Sí, rascacielos en América —dijo Esch con una risita.

—Puede construir rascacielos —dijo el relojero Samwald, sollozando.

—¡Claro, ráscate tú mismo…! Muros es lo que puede rascar.

—¡Desde las profundidades de la tierra hasta llegar al cielo…!

Gödicke había alzado los dos brazos enarbolando los bastones, tenía un aspecto formidable y amenazador:

—¡Resucitó de entre los muertos!

—¡Muerto! —gritó Esch—. ¡Los muertos se creen poderosos…! Sí, son poderosos, pero no pueden despertar a la vida en la mansión oscura… ¡Los muertos son los homicidas! ¡Homicidas! Eso son los muertos.

Se le trabó la lengua, asustado por la palabra «homicida», que ahora flotaba en el aire como una mariposa negra, pero más le asustó el comportamiento del mayor: el mayor se había levantado, con una sacudida extrañamente rígida, y repitiendo con mirada vidriosa la palabra «homicida» miraba hacia la puerta abierta, como esperando que allá afuera, en el patio, sucediera algo espantoso.

Todos callaron y observaron al mayor. El mayor no se movía, seguía mirando hacia la puerta, como hechizado, y Esch también miró hacia allí. Nada extraordinario se veía; el aire vibraba bajo la luz del sol, el muro de una casa situado en la otra orilla —«el muro de un malecón», pensó el mayor sin poderlo evitar — reverberaba a lo lejos, recortado como un rectángulo blanco enmarcado por el color pardo de la puerta y de sus batientes. Pero el símbolo había perdido aquella sensación de ventura inmediata y, cuando Esch,

aprovechando la calma que se había producido, volvió a leer la Biblia —«y se abrieron luego todas las puertas»—, la puerta volvió a ser para el Mayor una vulgar puerta de granero y, afuera, el patio solo de lejos evocaba la patria y el gran patio de la hacienda rodeado de establos. Y cuando Esch concluyó con las palabras: «No te hagas ningún mal, porque todos estamos aquí», ya no se originó un sentimiento de calma, sino de angustia: el angustioso miedo a que, en el mundo de las parábolas y de los símbolos, solo el Mal pudiera tomar cuerpo. «Todos estamos aquí», repitió una vez más Esch, pero el mayor ya no podía creerlo puesto que, ante sus ojos, ya no había apóstoles y discípulos, sino reservistas y reclutas, hombres de la soldadesca, y él sabía que Esch, tan solitario como él mismo, era el único que también miraba fijamente y con angustia hacia la puerta. Y así estaban los dos, uno junto a otro, de pie.

Y sucedió que, entonces, al fondo de aquel marco oscuro, entre las jambas de la puerta, surgió una figura redondeada, una silueta baja y rechoncha, que se acercaba pisando la blanca gravilla del patio sin que el sol se nublara. Huguenau. Con las manos a la espalda, como un transeúnte que se acerca con indolencia, cruzó despacio el patio hasta detenerse ante la puerta y, parpadeando, mirar hacia adentro. El mayor continuaba inmóvil, de pie, como Esch, pues aunque a ellos pudiera parecerles una eternidad, solo habían pasado unos segundos. En cuanto Huguenau se cercioró de lo que sucedía allí dentro, se descubrió y, sombrero en mano, entró de puntillas, se inclinó profundamente ante el mayor y fue a sentarse con aire humilde en el extremo de uno de los bancos. «He aquí en persona», pensó el mayor, «al homicida»… Pero tal vez no llegó a decirlo, porque la voz se estranguló en la garganta y, como pidiendo auxilio, levantó la mirada hacia Esch. Pero Esch sonreía, sonreía casi con sarcasmo, aunque también él había sentido la intromisión de Huguenau como una agresión aleve o como un crimen premeditado, como una muerte implacable e inevitable cuya llegada es, pese a todo, deseada incluso, aunque el brazo que sostenga la daga sea el de un mezquino viajante. Esch sonreía y, como al que se halla frente a la muerte se le concede la libertad de permitírselo todo, tocó con suavidad el brazo del mayor:

—Siempre hay un traidor entre nosotros.

Y el mayor respondió, en voz baja como él:

—Tiene que irse… Tiene que irse… —Y como Esch sacudiera la cabeza, añadió—: … expuesto desnudo y sin cubrir… Sí, desnudos y sin cubrir, así estamos nosotros expuestos en la otra orilla… —calló un instante y terminó diciendo—: ¡Qué importa en realidad! —porque en la oleada de náusea que de repente sentía crecer en sí fluía, poderosa y amplia, la indiferencia, fluía la fatiga. Cansado y agotado se dejó caer pesadamente en la silla junto a la mesita.

Esch hubiera preferido no seguir oyendo ni viendo nada más. Hubiera preferido dar por concluida la sesión. Pero no podía permitir que el mayor se marchara por culpa de aquella nota discordante, así que, golpeando la mesa con la Biblia de forma algo impertinente, gritó:

—Sigamos con el texto sagrado. Isaías, capítulo cuarenta y dos, versículo siete. «Para que abras los ojos a los ciegos, redimas a los cautivos y saques del calabozo a los que habitan en las tinieblas.»

—Amén —respondió Fendrich.

—Es una hermosa metáfora —añadió el mayor.

—Es una metáfora de la redención —dijo Esch.

—Efectivamente, es una metáfora de la penitencia redentora —dijo el mayor, irguiéndose ligeramente, conforme a las ordenanzas militares—, una hermosa metáfora… ¿Y si con esto pusiéramos punto final por hoy?

—Amén —dijo Esch abotonándose la chaqueta.

—Amén —dijeron todos.

Cuando hubieron salido del almacén, y mientras la gente, hablando de tanto en tanto en voz baja, iba dispersándose lentamente por el patio, Huguenau se abrió paso hasta acercarse al mayor, pero le chocó lo ausente de su expresión. Sin embargo, no quería renunciar a saludarle, mucho menos cuando se le había ocurrido una broma muy a propósito:

—Mi comandante, ¿de modo que ha venido usted para celebrar con nosotros las primicias de nuestro distinguido pastor recién salido del horno?

El breve y poco comunicativo gesto que el mayor le hizo con la cabeza le demostró que sus relaciones se habían enturbiado, cosa que resultó más patente aún cuando el mayor reaccionó volviéndose hacia atrás y diciendo, con una voz que llamaba la atención por su elevado tono:

—Venga, Esch, vamos a dar un paseo por las afueras.

Y dejaron a Huguenau sumido en una mezcla de rabia, incomprensión y vaga sensación de culpabilidad buscada.

Los dos hombres tomaron por el camino que atravesaba el jardín. El sol declinaba ya hacia la alta línea de montañas que cerraba el horizonte por el oeste.

Parecía que el verano se negara a concluir: con idéntica y radiante luminosidad, se sucedían uno tras otro los días de dorada quietud, como si quisieran, con su dulce calma, hacer doblemente absurdo el más sangrante de los períodos de la guerra. Al desaparecer el sol tras las cadenas de montañas, el cielo se teñía

de un azul cada vez más delicado, el camino se alargaba más pacífico cada vez y, en todas partes, la vida se replegaba sobre sí misma, como la respiración del que duerme. Aquella quietud era cada vez más ostensible y estaba cada vez más dispuesta a acoger el alma del hombre. Así pues, una paz dominical se extendía sobre toda la patria germana, y, con una nostalgia que le brotaba del alma cada vez con más ímpetu, el mayor pensaba en su mujer y en sus hijos, y los veía a todos paseando por los campos a la luz del crepúsculo:

—Ojalá todo esto hubiera concluido ya.

Y Esch no pudo hallar ni una sola palabra de consuelo. La vida toda se les aparecía a los dos sin ninguna esperanza; su único y menguado triunfo era pasear por aquel paisaje al atardecer y reposar en él sus miradas. «Es como la última gracia concedida a un condenado», pensó Esch. Y continuaron así en silencio.

LXIV

Sería falso afirmar que Hanna aguardaba con impaciencia que el permiso terminara. Temía que terminase. Noche tras noche era la amante de aquel hombre. Y su actividad cotidiana, que hasta entonces solo había consistido en huir confusamente de su conciencia y en refugiarse en la noche y en la cama, se dirigía en la actualidad y con más claridad a ese último fin, claridad pavorosa que, de tan duro y desafortunado como era todo lo que se había infiltrado en el ser-mujer y en el ser-hombre, apenas si podía seguir llamándose enamoramiento: una felicidad sin sonrisa, una felicidad puramente anatómica que, para el matrimonio de un abogado, resultaba en parte divinizada en exceso y en parte demasiado indigna.

En realidad su vida era un letargo sin fin. Pero este letargo se desenvolvía, por así decirlo, en estratos diferentes, sin hundirse nunca en el inconsciente; al contrario, era un sueño nítido en exceso y asociado a la dolorosa certeza de la paralización de la voluntad. Y cuanto menos libre, cuanto más lasciva y florida se sentía frente a los acontecimientos que la dominaban, tanto más lúcido se tornaba el estrato del conocimiento que abarcaba todo esto. Pero no era capaz de hablar de ello, y no solo porque se lo impidiera el pudor, sino —y sobre todo— porque la palabra nunca llega a alcanzar la desnudez que brota de la acción como la noche brota del día; por así decirlo, también las palabras se hallaban divididas en estratos: en uno, las palabras pronunciadas de noche, que eran como un balbuceo del todo sometido a los acontecimientos; y en el otro, las palabras pronunciadas durante el día; estas últimas, desligadas de los acontecimientos, trazaban un amplio arco en torno a dichos acontecimientos, una especie de bloqueo metódico, que es siempre el método usado por la razón antes de entregarse a la desesperación entre gritos y llantos. Hanna, al hablar, buscaba casi siempre a tientas la causa de la enfermedad que la había atacado.

—Cuando la guerra haya terminado… —decía Heinrich casi a diario—… todo será distinto… La guerra nos ha vuelto en cierto modo más primitivos.

—No puedo entenderlo —solía responder siempre Hanna.

A veces decía:

—No es posible llegar al fondo de estas cosas, todo es inimaginable.

Con ello se negaba a hablar con Heinrich de igual a igual; él tenía la culpa y, en realidad, tendría que defenderse en lugar de situarse por encima de las cosas. Y, apartando el rubio peine de carey de sus cabellos claros, dijo:

—Aquel tipo tan curioso al que encontramos en la cervecería habló de soledad.

Heinrich le quitó importancia:

—Estaba borracho.

Mientras se peinaba, Hanna no pudo evitar pensar que, al levantar los brazos, se le acusaban los pechos. Los sentía contra la seda de la blusa, bajo la que se perfilaban como dos pequeñas y puntiagudas tiendas de campaña. Se reflejaban en el espejo, a cuyos lados —derecha e izquierda— lucían dos apliques eléctricos con pantallas rosadas de suaves adornos. Oyó que Heinrich decía:

—Parece que nos hayan pasado por una criba… y pulverizado.

—En épocas así no deberían nacer niños.

Pensaba en el chico, tan parecido a Heinrich, y juzgó del todo inimaginable que su propio cuerpo rubio hubiera sido hecho para acoger una parte del hombre; le parecía increíble ser mujer. Tuvo que cerrar los ojos. Él dijo:

—Es muy posible que una generación de criminales esté a punto de surgir… Nada nos garantiza que hoy o mañana las cosas no vayan aquí como en Rusia… Esperemos que no… Aunque la única objeción que puede encontrarse es la dureza de la ideología todavía en pie…

Ambos notaron que la conversación caía en el vacío. Era más o menos como si un acusado se propusiera decir: «¡Qué maravilloso día hace, señores del jurado!». Y Hanna calló un instante, dejándose llevar por una oleada de odio, la oleada de odio en cuyo seno las noches se volvían aún más ignominiosas,

más profundas, más lujuriosas.

—Hemos de estar a la expectativa… Sin duda depende de la guerra… pero no así… Es como si la guerra solo fuera un segundo…

—¿Un segundo qué? —preguntó Heinrich.

Hanna frunció el entrecejo:

—Nosotros estamos en un segundo lugar, la guerra ocupa un segundo lugar… Lo primero es algo invisible, algo que ha salido de nosotros mismos…

Recordó que había esperado con ansia que el viaje de bodas concluyera —eso creía al menos entonces —, para poder regresar rápidamente y montar su hogar. Después de todo, la situación actual era muy parecida: un permiso es también como un viaje de bodas. Lo que entonces se había hecho patente no era otra cosa, desde luego, que un presentimiento de aislamiento y de soledad. Tal vez, se le ocurrió ahora confusamente, tal vez la soledad sea el origen, el germen de la enfermedad. Y como todo había empezado ya entonces, inmediatamente después de la boda —Hanna calculó: sí, empezó en Suiza—, y como todo cuadraba a la perfección, su sospecha se agudizó: Heinrich debió de tener entonces algún fallo irreparable o tuvo que cometer alguna injusticia con ella, una injusticia no solo imposible de ignorar, sino que, al contrario, solo podía aumentar, una injusticia gigantesca que había contribuido a desencadenar la guerra. Se había untado de crema, distribuyéndola cuidadosamente con los dedos, y ahora se miraba en el espejo con una atención circunspecta. El rostro joven de entonces había desaparecido y se había convertido en un rostro de mujer a través del cual se transparentaba el de la muchacha joven. Ignoraba por qué todas aquellas cosas se hallaban en íntima relación, pero puso fin al silencioso curso de sus pensamientos diciendo:

—La guerra no es la causa, solo viene en segundo lugar.

Y entonces lo supo: la guerra es un segundo rostro, el rostro de la noche. Era la desintegración del mundo, el rostro de la noche que se deshacía en polvo y en cenizas frías y volátiles, y era la desintegración de su propio rostro; era como la desintegración que sentía ella siempre que Heinrich la besaba en las axilas.

—Desde luego, la guerra no es sino la consecuencia de nuestra política errónea —dijo Heinrich.

Y quizá él hubiera podido comprender incluso que la política solo venía en segundo lugar, mientras existiera una causa más profunda. Pero su explicación le dejó satisfecho y, por otra parte, Hanna, echándose un poco de aquel perfume francés, ahora insustituible, y aspirando su aroma, había dejado de escuchar a su marido. Inclinando la cabeza, presentaba la nuca para que la besara en el nacimiento plateado del pelo, cosa que él hizo.

—Otra vez —dijo ella.

LXV

Esch era un hombre de comportamiento impetuoso. Por ello cualquier bagatela podía arrastrarle a ofrecerse en holocausto. Su objetivo era la claridad unívoca: hubiera querido modelar un mundo cuya claridad unívoca fuera tan fuerte que él, en su propia soledad, se atase a ella como a una barra de hierro.

Huguenau era un hombre que siempre olfateaba el viento; incluso cuando todo estaba en calma, olfateaba él los malos vientos.

Hubo un hombre que huyendo de su propia soledad buscó refugio en la India y en América. Pretendía resolver el problema de la soledad con medios terrenales. Era un esteta y por ello tuvo que matarse.

Marguerite era una niña, una niña concebida en un acto sexual, cargada con el pecado original y abandonada al pecado; pudiera ocurrir que alguien la saludara con una inclinación de cabeza y que le preguntara cómo se llama, pero este superficial interés no la salvará.

No existe símbolo alguno que, para expresarse, no precise de otro símbolo. ¿Lo inmediato está al principio o al final de la serie de símbolos?

Poesía de la Edad Media: la serie de símbolos empieza en Dios y vuelve a Dios; está en Dios.

Hanna Wendling deseaba un orden de cosas en cuyo equilibrio inestable lo simbólico volviera a su origen, como en una poesía.

Uno se despide, otro deserta: todos desertan del caos, pero solo aquel que jamás estuvo atado no será fusilado.

Nada hay más desesperanzado que un niño.

Quien conoce el aislamiento intelectual todavía puede hallar salvación en el romanticismo, y el aislamiento espiritual siempre ofrece una vía de solución: la que lleva al sexo, al otro, pero, para la soledad en sí, para la soledad inmediata, ya no es posible hallar solución en lo simbólico.

El mayor Von Pasenow era un hombre que anhelaba profundamente recuperar la confianza en la patria, que anhelaba hallar una confianza invisible en las cosas visibles. Y su anhelo era tan fuerte que lo visible se hundía, paso a paso, en lo invisible, pero, al mismo tiempo, lo invisible se revelaba en lo visible.

«¡Ah!», dice el romántico vistiéndose el traje de un sistema de valores que le es ajeno, «¡ah, por fin soy como vosotros y ya no estoy solo!» «¡Ah!», dice el esteta poniéndose el mismo traje, «sigo estando solo, pero es un traje muy bonito.» Dentro del romanticismo, el hombre esteta representa el principio del Mal.

Los niños se familiarizan al instante con cualquier cosa: enseguida todo es para ellos inmediato, aunque al mismo tiempo sea, no obstante, un símbolo. De ahí el radicalismo de los niños.

Cuando lloraba, Marguerite lloraba de rabia. Ni siquiera tenía compasión de sí misma.

Cuanto más solo está el hombre, cuanto menos rígido es el sistema de valores en el que se encuadra, tanto más sus actos dependen de lo irracional. El hombre romántico, enclavado dentro de las formas de un sistema de valores dogmatizantes y ajeno a él, es —aunque resulte increíble— absolutamente racional y nada infantil.

Racionalismo de lo irracional: un hombre en apariencia absolutamente racional como Huguenau no es capaz de distinguir el Bien del Mal. En un mundo absolutamente racional, no existe ningún sistema de valores, no hay pecadores, sino a lo sumo parásitos.

Tampoco el esteta distingue el Bien del Mal, por eso fascina. Pero él sabe a la perfección lo que está bien y lo que está mal, simplemente no quiere diferenciarlo. Y esto le hace objeto de reproche.

Es una época tan racional que de continuo ha de estar huyendo.

LXVI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 11

Me mantengo lo más apartado posible de los judíos, pero, hoy como ayer, me veo obligado a seguir

observándolos. Por ello siempre me maravilla la situación de confianza que Simson Litwak, ese semilibrepensador, ocupa entre los judíos. Es público y notorio que el tal Litwak es un tonto al que hicieron estudiar, porque no servía, simplemente, para desempeñar una auténtica profesión —¡basta comparar su cara, plana y anodina, que hace más de cincuenta años mira el mundo desde su barba, con los rostros surcados de arrugas y de pensamientos de los ancianos judíos!—, y, sin embargo, entre ellos este hombre es, al parecer, una especie de oráculo al que consultan en cualquier ocasión. Tal vez sea una reminiscencia de la fe puesta en que el portavoz de Dios ha de ser balbuceante, pues no puede basarse en el respeto científico; saben de sobra que ellos poseen la mejor ciencia. Hay pocas posibilidades de que yo me equivoque. Desde luego el doctor Litwak intenta enmascarar las cosas, pero no lo consigue. La historia de su espíritu ilustrado es en realidad mera impostura; su temeroso respeto ante la sabiduría de los judíos ancianos es enorme y, si él, pese a lo mal que lo trato, sigue saludándome amablemente, he de agradecérselo sin duda alguna al hecho de que me niego a calificar de «prejuicio» la visión talmúdica del mundo que poseen los ancianos judíos. Es evidente que de esta negativa él ha sacado la conclusión que cabía esperar: que no dejaré que Nuchem se salga del recto camino, y por esto acepta que yo rechace una y otra vez su persona y su confianza.

Hoy me lo he encontrado en la escalera. Yo subía y él bajaba. De haber sido a la inversa, yo habría podido pasar corriendo junto a él, pero cuando alguien baja como una tromba no es fácil de esquivar. Yo subía lentamente, a causa del bochorno de la urbe y de la falta de buena alimentación. A modo de broma, me ha cerrado el paso atravesando su bastón. Sin duda pretendía que yo saltara por encima como un perro de aguas (me he dado cuenta de repente de que en los últimos tiempos me ofendo con suma facilidad, con demasiada facilidad; también esto puede ser consecuencia de la mala alimentación). He levantado el bastón con dos dedos para abrirme paso. ¡Ah, cómo ha vuelto a repugnarme su risita confiada! Me ha saludado con una inclinación de cabeza:

—¿Qué dice usted ahora? La gente es muy desgraciada.

—Sí, hace mucho calor.

—¡Si fuera por culpa del calor…!

—Sí, los austríacos han sido detenidos en las Siete Comunidades.

—¡Bromea usted con sus Siete Comunidades…! Bueno ¿y qué dice usted a esto? Él dice que en el corazón ha de haber alegría.

El estado en que me hallo hace que me enzarce en las discusiones más tontas:

—Al fin y al cabo, suena a salmo de David… ¿Tiene usted algo que objetar?

—¿Algo que objetar? ¿Que objetar…? Yo solo digo que el viejo abuelo tiene razón; los viejos siempre tienen razón.

—Prejuicios, Simson, prejuicios.

—¡A mí no me critique usted!

—Bueno, ¿y qué dice el gran abuelo?

—¡Fíjese bien! Dice que un judío no ha de alegrarse con el corazón sino con esto —y se ha dado una palmada en la frente.

—O sea, ¿con la cabeza?

—Con la mollera, sí.

—¿Y qué hacen ustedes con el corazón si se alegran con la mollera?

—Con el corazón servimos a Dios… *uwchol lewowche uwchol nawscheche uwchol meaudeche*, que quiere decir: De todo corazón, con toda el alma, con todas las fuerzas.

—¿También dice eso el abuelo?

—No es solo que lo diga él, es que es así.

He intentado mirarle con compasión, pero no lo he conseguido:

—¿Y usted presume de hombre ilustrado?

—Naturalmente que soy un hombre ilustrado… Como lo es usted también. Pero ¿va por eso a quebrantar la Ley?

Se ha reído.

—Que Dios le bendiga, doctor Litwak —y he continuado subiendo.

—Hasta la centésima generación —y ha seguido riéndose—, pero nadie puede infringir la Ley: ni usted ni yo ni Nuchem.

He subido la proletaria escalera. ¿Por qué me quedo aquí? En el hospicio estaría mejor. Citas de la Biblia en las paredes en lugar de grabados. Por citar un ejemplo.

LXVII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 12

Él dijo: avanza mi mula trotando con cascos veloces;
con brida escarlata ataviada y collar de sonajas
a entrambos nos lleva al sueño de Sión.
Él dijo: Yo te he llamado.
Él dijo: Grandes cosas veo en mi corazón,
el templo contemplo de mil escalones,
la ciudad creada por nuestros abuelos.
Él dijo: Hagamos una cabaña.
Él dijo: Ayer yo esperaba poder prodigarme,
espera absoluta, sumido en el Libro yo estaba.
Él dijo: Su vuelta acechaba y entonces llegó la alegría.
No lo dijo, su corazón era el que hablaba.
También ella calla. En silencio y absortos
así caminaban, embriagados no obstante
de anhelos, silencio y oculto esplendor.
Así caminaban, sin casi fijarse
en calles, cuarteles ni turbios figones.
Ella dijo: Allá en lo más hondo de mi corazón
se esconde una llama pequeña que crece
y, tras avivarse en fuego que brilla,
en luz se convierte e irradia esplendor.
Él dijo: He pensado en ti.
Ella dijo: Mi corazón se consume en el fuego,
tu dulce faz inclinas sobre la pecadora.
Él dijo: Con luz propia brilla el camino
que al hombre devoto conduce a Sión.
Ella dijo: Sufriste en la cruz por nosotros.
Ellos no dijeron nada: la palabra yacía en penumbra.
Ellos no hicieron nada: el acto ya estaba realizado.

LXVIII

—¡Cómo!, ¿todavía quiere usted salir a estas horas, teniente Jaretzki?

La enfermera Mathilde se hallaba sentada junto a la entrada del hospital y, en el rectángulo iluminado de la puerta, el teniente Jaretzki encendía un cigarrillo.

—Con este calor, hoy no he salido aún… —cerró el encendedor—. Los encendedores de gasolina son un gran invento… ¿Sabe ya que me voy la semana próxima?

—Sí, eso he oído, se va a Kreuznach, a reponerse… Sin duda estará contento de poder salir por fin de aquí.

—Sí, claro… También usted se alegrará de deshacerse de mí.

—No puede decirse que haya sido usted un paciente fácil.

Silencio.

—Venga a dar un paseo conmigo, enfermera; ahora ha refrescado.

—He de volver adentro enseguida… —la enfermera Mathilde dudó—. Pero, si usted quiere, paseemos un poco por delante del hospital.

—Estoy sobrio del todo, enfermera —dijo Jaretzki en tono tranquilizador.

Anduvieron calle arriba. El hospital con sus hileras de ventanas iluminadas quedaba a su derecha. La ciudad, cuyos contornos se adivinaban, más negros que la noche, quedaba allá abajo. Brillaban algunas luces y, más alta, alguna que otra luz indicaba la existencia de una casa de campo aislada. Los relojes de la ciudad dieron las nueve.

—¿No le gustaría irse también de aquí, señorita Mathilde?

—¡Oh, yo estoy a gusto…! Tengo mi trabajo.

—A decir verdad, es usted extraordinariamente amable dignándose dar un paseo con un tipo como yo, borracho y reservista.

—¿Y por qué no habría de pasear con usted, teniente Jaretzki?

—Sí, claro; en realidad, por qué no… —Y, tras unos instantes de silencio, añadió—: O sea, que quiere

usted quedarse aquí toda la vida.

—No tanto… Cuando acabe la guerra…

—Entonces, ¿quiere usted volver a Silesia, a su casa?

—¿Cómo sabe eso?

—¡Oh!, estas cosas se saben enseguida…¿Y cree usted que volverá a su casa, así, tranquilamente, como si nada hubiera sucedido?

—La verdad es que nunca he pensado en ello… Además, las cosas nunca suceden como una las imagina.

—¿Sabe una cosa…? Estoy completamente sobrio… Tengo el íntimo convencimiento de que nadie regresará de verdad a su casa.

—Todos queremos volver a casa, teniente. ¿Por qué habríamos de luchar si no fuera por nuestro país natal?

Jaretzki se detuvo:

—¿Por qué habríamos de luchar…? Por qué hemos luchado… Es mejor que no lo pregunte… Además, tiene usted razón, las cosas nunca son como uno las imagina.

La enfermera Mathilde guardó silencio. Luego, dijo:

—¿Qué ha querido usted decir, teniente?

Jaretzki rió:

—Bueno, si le hubieran dicho que un día pasearía usted con un ingeniero borracho y manco, ¿se lo hubiera creído?, siendo como es usted condesa.

La enfermera Mathilde no contestó. No era condesa, pero sí una señorita con el «von» delante, y su abuela sí era condesa.

—Tal vez dé lo mismo… Si yo fuera conde tampoco cambiaría nada: también tendría que emborracharme… Estamos todos demasiado solos para que una cosa así pueda tener importancia, ¿sabe…? ¿La he hecho enfadar ahora?

—¡Qué va!

Ella observó en la oscuridad el perfil de Jaretzki y tuvo miedo de que él la cogiera de la mano. Cruzó la calle.

—Hemos de volver ya, teniente.

—También usted ha de sentirse muy sola, de lo contrario no lo soportaría… Alegrémonos de que la guerra no se acabe…

Estaban de nuevo frente a la verja del hospital. Ahora la mayoría de las ventanas se veían a oscuras. Débiles luces de emergencia brillaban en las salas de enfermos.

—Bien, ahora voy a beber algo… De todos modos, usted tampoco lo soportaría.

—Debo entrar ya, teniente Jaretzki.

—Buenas noches, señorita Mathilde, y gracias.

—Buenas noches, teniente.

La enfermera Mathilde se sentía triste y decepcionada.

—No vuelva demasiado tarde, teniente —le gritó.

LXIX

Desde que en aquella ocasión paseara con Esch por los campos al atardecer, sucedía con frecuencia que el mayor, al terminar su servicio, tomaba el camino de la calle Fischer y, en cuanto cruzaba un par de travesías, sus pasos se tornaban vacilantes, se detenía indeciso y luego volvía atrás. Se hubiera dicho que merodeaba en torno a *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris.* De no temer un encuentro con Huguenau, tal vez incluso habría entrado, pero no quería tropezárselo ni por la calle (solo el pensarlo le llenaba de angustia). No obstante, cuando, de repente, vio ante sí a Esch en lugar de a Huguenau, se preguntó si no sería este el encuentro que más temía. Porque allí estaba él, el comandante de la plaza, vestido de uniforme y con el sable a la cintura, frente a un redactor con traje civil; él, de uniforme, a los ojos de todos y en plena calle, había tendido la mano a aquel hombre y, en lugar de dejar que se alejara, él, olvidando toda compostura, se sentía feliz al ver que se disponía a acompañarle. Sin embargo, Esch se había descubierto, en señal de respeto, y el mayor observó aquel rostro serio y surcado de arrugas; observó aquel pelo tieso y gris, cortado muy corto, y sintió una sensación de paz. Fue como recordar de repente las veladas bíblicas de su país natal y, al mismo tiempo, evocar la fraternidad de aquella tarde, fraternidad que iba unida a la necesidad de decirle algo amable a este hombre, que casi era un amigo, aunque tal vez solo fuera para que el amigo guardara de él un buen recuerdo; dudó un momento aún y, al final, dijo:

—Venga usted.

Aquellos paseos se repitieron con frecuencia en lo sucesivo, aunque desde luego no con la frecuencia

que el mayor e incluso Esch habrían deseado. Pues no solo los tiempos eran cada vez más agitados —tropas que se acuartelaban y que volvían a partir, columnas de camiones que atravesaban ruidosamente las calles, horas de descanso nocturno que muchas noches el comandante de la plaza tenía que sacrificar en aras del servicio—, sino que el mayor Von Pasenow no acaba de decidirse a volver a entrar en *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* y Esch tardó algún tiempo en adivinarlo. Entonces comenzó a obrar en consecuencia: procurando pasar inadvertido, esperaba en las inmediaciones de la comandancia y, si se terciaba, llevaba a Marguerite consigo:

—Este diablillo se empeña en venir con nosotros —decía.

En verdad el mayor no veía muy claro si la familiaridad de Marguerite debía considerarse como una amabilidad o como una impertinencia; pero la acogía con amabilidad y le acariciaba sus negros rizos. Después caminaban los tres al mismo paso por los campos o por el sendero lleno de matorrales que bordeaba la orilla, y a veces parecía despertarse en su interior un anhelo de despedida, un blando y tierno fluir del corazón, un aliento que, suspirante, brotaba de las aguas, algo así como la certidumbre de un final contenido en el principio mismo. Pero aunque todas estas sensaciones eran muy dulces, se mezclaba en ellas, no obstante, una ligera irritación, ya fuera porque Esch no participaba de aquella despedida, ya porque resultaba inadmisible que Esch participara, ya porque Esch no dejaba traslucir ni lo uno ni lo otro, sino que se encerraba en un mutismo decepcionante. Todo ello resultaba en cierto modo oscuro e insidioso, pues todavía quedaba la borrosa esperanza de que todo se arreglaría y terminaría bien en cuanto Esch rompiera a hablar. ¡Ay!, resultaba sorprendentemente indescifrable saber qué esperaba él en realidad que dijera Esch y, no obstante, Esch hubiera tenido que saberlo. Así pues, caminaban en silencio sumidos en la transparencia del atardecer y en aquel descorazonamiento cada vez mayor, y la luminosidad de los campos no era sino una luminosidad falsa y fatigada. Y cuando Esch se quitaba el sombrero para que el aire acariciase aquel pelo corto y tieso, de cepillo, la familiaridad de aquel gesto podía considerarse como una impertinencia, tanto que el mayor casi compadecía a la niña por haber ido a depender de un hombre así.

—Pequeña esclava —dijo en una ocasión.

Pero también estas palabras se sumieron en una fatigada indiferencia. Marguerite, sin embargo, corría ante ellos sin preocuparse en absoluto de los dos hombres.

Habían llegado a la parte más elevada del valle y bordeaban el bosque. La hierba seca crujía bajo sus zapatos. En el valle reinaba la calma. Allá abajo, en el camino, chirriaban las ruedas de los carros; los campos segados mostraban su tierra color pardo, y de la profundidad del follaje surgía un airecillo fresco. Los viñedos extendían su verdor por las laderas de las montañas, en los múltiples susurros del bosque se percibía ya la aguda nitidez del otoño, y los arbustos del lindero del bosque, con sus moras negras y rojas, estaban a punto de empezar a secarse como en el otoño. Por las laderas del oeste, el sol descendía y teñía de ardientes resplandores las ventanas de las casas del valle. Las casas se erguían todas sobre un largo tapiz de sombra (inclinado hacia el este), y en los tejados rojinegros de la prisión y también en los desnudos y toscos patios se veían prolongaciones puntiagudas.

Por la ladera, a través de los campos, descendía un pequeño sendero que iba a parar a la carretera próxima al presidio. Marguerite, que corría delante de ellos, dobló un recodo, y el mayor lo interpretó como un signo de la mano de Dios:

—Regresemos —dijo con tono cansado.

Cuando, descendiendo, habían llegado más o menos a la mitad del valle, el mayor y Esch se detuvieron y prestaron atención: hasta ellos llegaba a intervalos, y sin que pudiera adivinarse de dónde provenía, un curioso runruneo. No se veía nada, tan solo un coche que, procedente de la ciudad, avanzaba tocando a cada momento el claxon y cuyo motor sonaba con normalidad; el coche iba dejando tras de sí una larga nube de polvo. Aquel ruido extraño nada tenía que ver con el coche.

—Este ruido no augura nada bueno —dijo el mayor extrañado.

—Es una máquina —dijo Esch, aunque el ruido no recordaba en absoluto el de una máquina.

El coche, tras salvar las distintas curvas de la carretera, llegó a la penitenciaría con gran aparato de bocinazos. Esch, con su aguda vista, constató que era el coche de la comandancia, y, al no verlo aparecer por detrás de la prisión, se inquietó. No dijo nada, pero apresuró el paso. El ruido era cada vez más fuerte e intenso y, cuando llegaron ante el portal del presidio, vieron el coche detenido en medio de un enjambre de personas muy excitadas.

—Aquí ha pasado algo —dijo el mayor.

Y entonces, procedente de detrás de las ventanas de la cárcel, enrejadas con rejas de hierro y cerradas con postigos, oyeron con toda claridad un coro horrible que, repitiéndola tres veces seguidas cada vez, pronunciaba una palabra: «Hambre, hambre, hambre… hambre, hambre, hambre… hambre, hambre, hambre…». De cuando en cuando, el coro era interrumpido por un aullido general. El chófer se acercó a ellos corriendo:

—A sus órdenes, mi comandante, con todos los respetos, es un motín… Le hemos buscado inútilmente,

mi comandante…

Después volvió hacia atrás para avisar a los centinelas tirando de la campanilla.

Todos se apartaron para dejar paso al mayor, pero este no se había movido. El aire seguía vibrando bajo el coro de tres tiempos, y entonces Marguerite comenzó a saltar al compás, repitiendo alegremente:

—Hambre, hambre, hambre.

El mayor miró hacia el edificio de las ventanas impenetrables y escalofriantes, miró a la niña, que saltaba y reía con una risa que le pareció extrañamente maligna y dura, y se sobrecogió de espanto. ¡Oh, destino inevitable, oh prueba ineludible! El chófer seguía tirando de la cuerda de la campanilla y golpeando la puerta con la culata del fusil; hasta que por fin se abrió la mirilla y, rechinando pesadamente sobre sus goznes, la puerta se abrió poco a poco. El mayor, apoyado en un árbol, murmuró moviendo apenas los labios:

—Esto es el fin.

Esch hizo un movimiento, como queriendo acudir en su ayuda, y el mayor lo apartó con un gesto:

—Esto es el fin —repitió.

Pero se irguió de inmediato, se llevó la mano al pecho, acarició la Cruz de Hierro y, con la mano puesta en la empuñadura del sable, se dirigió a paso vivo hacia la puerta de la cárcel.

El mayor desapareció tras la puerta. Esch se sentó sobre un pequeño montículo con arbustos que había junto a la carretera. El aire seguía vibrando bajo el coro de gritos sincopados.

Se oyó un solo disparo, seguido de un nuevo aullido. Luego unos últimos gritos que sonaron como las últimas gotas de un grifo que acaba de cerrarse. Luego silencio. Esch miró hacia la puerta que se había cerrado tras el mayor.

—Esto es el fin —dijo también ahora Esch.

Pero el fin no llegaba: ni estalló un terremoto, ni apareció ningún ángel, ni la puerta se abrió. La niña se hallaba agachada a su lado, y le hubiera gustado tomarla en brazos. Los muros de la cárcel se recortaban contra el cielo transparente del atardecer como un decorado de teatro, se perfilaban como una dentadura a la que le faltaran piezas, y Esch se sintió muy lejos de sí mismo, muy lejos de lo que estaba sucediendo ante su presencia, muy lejos de todo. No se atrevía a cambiar de postura, e incluso había olvidado cómo había ido a parar allí. Junto al portal colgaba un tablero con un escrito indescifrable; naturalmente, allí se indicaban las horas de visita, pero eran simples palabras y nada más. Porque también los demagogos, los asesinos y los monstruos que estaban allí encarcelados saldrían algún día para formar parte de una comunidad nueva y más luminosa en la Tierra Prometida. Oyó que la niña decía:

—Ahí está tío Huguenau.

Y vio a Huguenau avanzar con pasos precipitados, le vio y no se sorprendió: tan en silencio sucedía todo. En silencio los pasos de Huguenau, en silencio los movimientos de cuantos se hallaban frente a la puerta de la cárcel; todo se hacía en silencio como los movimientos de los acróbatas y de los funámbulos cuando calla la música, tan en silencio como iba empalideciendo el cielo diáfano del atardecer. La lejanía se extendía irrecuperable frente al soñador, soñador que no soñaba, frente al huérfano en perpetua búsqueda de un hogar, y él era como un hombre cuya nostalgia ha cambiado sin él saberlo, como alguien que ha anestesiado simplemente sus dolores, pero sin lograr olvidarlos. Se hicieron visibles las primeras estrellas, y a Esch le pareció que llevaba días, años, sentado allí, rodeado de aquella calma espectral y sorda. Después la gente fue reduciendo sus movimientos, apagándose, hasta extinguirlos definitivamente y convertirse en una masa silenciosa, negra y expectante congregada ante la puerta. Por último, Esch solo sintió la hierba húmeda bajo las palmas de sus manos.

La niña había desparecido; tal vez se había ido con Huguenau. Esch, sin preocuparse, miraba fijamente hacia la puerta. Por fin apareció el mayor. Caminaba muy deprisa y en línea recta, cosa desacostumbrada en él; casi daba la impresión de querer ocultar que cojeaba. Se fue directo al coche. Esch se levantó de un salto. El Mayor, ya junto al coche y muy erguido, miraba por encima de Esch, por encima de la masa que se había apelotonado silenciosa en torno al vehículo, miraba hacia la blanca carretera y hacia la ciudad, en cuyas ventanas comenzaban a brillar las primeras luces. Muy cerca se encendió una luz roja; Esch sabía perfectamente dónde. Era muy posible que también el mayor se hubiera dado cuenta, porque bajó la mirada hasta Esch y, tendiéndole primero la mano, dijo:

—Bueno, qué más da.

Esch no dijo nada; se abrió paso por entre la multitud y echó a andar a través de los campos. Pero si se hubiera vuelto y no hubiese habido tanta oscuridad, habría podido ver al mayor que, de pie, inmóvil, le seguía con la mirada mientras él se confundía con la noche.

Al cabo de un rato oyó el motor del coche y vio cómo los faros encendidos iban resiguiendo las curvas de la carretera.

Huguenau regresó a su casa desde la cárcel a paso de marcha atlética. Cuando llegó a la imprenta, hizo parar la máquina:

—Hay que insertar algo importante, Lindner.

Y, a continuación, se dirigió a su cuarto, donde se puso a escribir. Cuando hubo terminado dijo «¡Salud!» y escupió en dirección a las habitaciones de Esch. «¡Salud!», repitió al pasar ante la cocina, y luego entregó a Lindner lo que había redactado.

—Que vaya en la sección «Crónica local» y con letra pequeña —ordenó.

Y al día siguiente, escrito con letra pequeña y en la «Crónica local» de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* pudo leerse:

INCIDENTE EN NUESTRA CÁRCEL

Ayer tarde, en la cárcel de nuestra ciudad se produjeron algunas escenas nada agradables. Varios reclusos, creyendo tener motivos, protestaron porque la comida no era tan buena como de costumbre, ocasión esta que fue aprovechada por elementos carentes de sentido patriótico para insultar ruidosamente a la Administración. Con la eficaz intervención del mayor Von Pasenow, comandante de la plaza, cuya presencia fue requerida de inmediato, y gracias a su serenidad y a su sensatez, el incidente fue solventado enseguida. Los rumores relativos a un intento de fuga por parte de unos supuestos desertores, encarcelados aquí en espera de un juicio justo, carecen de todo fundamento, según nos informan fuentes fidedignas, ya que no hay desertores encarcelados en nuestra penitenciaría. No hubo heridos.

Había sido otra de sus lúcidas inspiraciones y Huguenau casi no había podido dormir de satisfacción. Se repetía a sí mismo una y otra vez:

Primero: El mayor se enfadará por lo de los desertores, pero la historia de la mala alimentación no es precisamente satisfactoria para un comandante de la plaza, y si alguien merece que se le haga enfadar, es el mayor.

Segundo: El mayor hará responsable de este artículo a Esch, sobre todo por la alusión a los informes de fuentes fidedignas; nadie creerá al señor redactor si dice que él no sabía nada; sin duda los paseos de los dos caballeros han terminado para siempre.

Tercero: Cuando uno se imagina cómo rabiará ahora el flaco pastor de dentadura caballuna, siente un agradable y dulce sabor de boca.

Cuarto: Todo se ha desarrollado a la perfección y dentro de los estrictos cauces legales. Él era el editor y podía escribir cuanto quisiera; además, el mayor debería en realidad darle las gracias por los términos elogiosos que le había dedicado.

Quinto y sexto, pues se podría proseguir así largamente: había sido un asunto estupendamente logrado, un buen golpe, en resumidas cuentas; y encima, ahora el mayor le respetaría: los informes de Huguenau son auténticos, por más que se los desprecie.

Sí, quinto y sexto y séptimo: Se podría continuar de manera indefinida, pues todavía no habían salido a la luz muchas cosas, cosas desde luego ocultas y bastante desagradables en las que era mejor no pensar.

Por la mañana, Huguenau leyó el artículo en la imprenta y volvió a sentirse muy satisfecho. Miró por la ventana hacia arriba, hacia la redacción, y esbozó su irónica mueca. Pero no subió. Y no porque tuviera miedo del pastor que estaba allí arriba. Cuando uno ejerce simplemente sus derechos no tiene por qué tener miedo. Y hemos de ejercer nuestros derechos cuando nos vemos perseguidos. Aunque suponga que todo se venga abajo, ¡uno debe ejercer sus derechos! Lo único que uno pretende es vivir en paz y dentro de un orden, sin ser molestado; lo único que uno desea es ocupar el lugar que le corresponde. Y Huguenau se fue a la barbería, donde una vez más leyó con atención *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*.

De todos modos la comida constituía un problema. Resultaba muy desagradable sentarse a la misma mesa que Esch, el cual, aunque injustamente, se sentiría engañado. Uno conoce de sobra la mirada censora de los curas. Pueden conseguir que a uno le siente mal la comida. Aquel cura era un comunista que quería socializarlo todo y que luego actuaba como si fueran los demás quienes se propusieran trastornar el mundo, solo porque los demás no estaban dispuestos a decirle a todo amén.

Huguenau se va a dar un paseo para reflexionar sobre todo aquello. Sin embargo, no se le ocurre nada. Es como en el colegio, ya puedes ser todo lo ingenioso que quieras, cuando llega el momento oportuno, todo lo que se te ocurre es fingir que estás enfermo. Así pues, vuelve atrás para llegar antes que Esch, sube a ver a mamá Esch (así la llama en estos últimos tiempos). Y a cada escalón, su expresión de dolor va siendo más auténtica. Tal vez esté enfermo de verdad y lo mejor fuera, tal vez, no comer nada en absoluto. Pero, después de todo, la pensión está pagada y él no tiene por qué regalarle nada al tal Esch.

—Señora Esch, me encuentro mal.

La señora Esch le mira y queda impresionada por la expresión doliente del rostro de Huguenau.

—Señora Esch, no quiero comer nada.

—Pero señor Huguenau, eso no puede ser… Una sopa, voy a prepararle una buena sopita… Nunca le ha sentado mal a nadie.

Huguenau reflexiona. Luego dice melancólico:

—¿Un caldo?

La señora Esch queda perpleja:

—Sí, pero… Es que no tengo en casa carne para caldo.

Huguenau se pone más melancólico aún:

—Sí, sí, nada de carne… Creo que tengo fiebre… Tóqueme, mamá Esch, tóqueme, mire qué caliente estoy…

La señora Esch se acerca y pone indecisa un dedo sobre la mano de Huguenau.

—Quizá sería mejor una tortilla —dice Huguenau.

—¿Y no sería mejor una infusión?

Huguenau olfateó economías:

—¡No, no…! Una tortilla me sentará bien… Tendrá usted huevos en casa… De tres huevos tal vez.

Y Huguenau sale de la cocina con paso vacilante.

En parte porque es lo adecuado en un enfermo y en parte porque ha de recuperar el sueño perdido la noche anterior, se tiende en el sofá. Pero lo de dormir no es fácil: la excitación provocada por su buen golpe periodístico todavía le hace temblar. Tal vez hubiera tenido que echarse en la cama. Medio somnoliento mira hacia el espejo que hay sobre el mueble lavabo, mira hacia la ventana, escucha los ruidos de la casa. Son los ruidos propios de la cocina: oye partir carne. (O sea, que la gorda, la Esch, le ha engañado a él para que el fulano ese arramble con toda la carne. Naturalmente, se disculpará diciendo que no puede hacer caldo con carne de cerdo, pero un poco de carne de cerdo asada tampoco puede sentarle mal a un enfermo.) Después oye picar sobre una tabla, con golpes secos y breves, y reconoce el ruido de cortar verduras; sí, siempre miraba con temor cómo su madre, con golpes rápidos, trinchaba perejil o apio, temiendo siempre que se cortara las yemas de los dedos. Los cuchillos de cocina cortan mucho. Se alegra de que haya cesado el ruido de cuchillos y de que la madre se seque los dedos, incólumes, en el trapo de la cocina. Si al menos pudiera dormir, pero lo mejor sería meterse en la cama y que la mujer de Esch se sentara a su lado haciendo punto o aplicándole compresas. Se toca la mano: realmente está ardiendo. Hay que pensar en algo agradable. Por ejemplo, en mujeres. En mujeres desnudas. La escalera cruje. Alguien sube. Es curioso, su padre no solía ser tan puntual. ¡Ah, no, es el cartero! Mamá Esch habla con él. Antes venía siempre el panadero; ahora nunca se le ve por aquí. Es imposible dormir cuando se tiene hambre.

Huguenau, parpadeando, mira de nuevo hacia la ventana, observa a lo lejos las cadenas montañosas de Colmar; el alcaide del Alto Königsburg es un comandante, el emperador en persona lo colocó en aquel puesto. *Haïssez les Prussiens et les ennemies de la sainte religion.* Alguien ríe junto al oído de Huguenau. Oye hablar en dialecto alsaciano. Un puchero se derrama: el líquido cae burbujeante sobre el fuego. Ahora alguien le susurra al oído: «Hambre, hambre, hambre». Esto es demasiado idiota. ¿Por qué no tiene él derecho a comer como los demás? Siempre le han tratado peor y más injustamente que a los demás. ¿Acaso van a poner al mayor en su sitio? La escalera vuelve a crujir. Huguenau se encoge de miedo: son los pasos de su padre. ¡Oh, Dios!, tan solo es Esch, el señor pastor.

Un cerdo el tal Esch, merecido tiene que le hagan rabiar. Donde las dan las toman. Los cuchillos de cocina cortan mucho; además son muy puntiagudos. Ahora se ha hecho protestante sin empacho, luego se convertirá al judaísmo y se hará circuncidar. Hay que decírselo a su mujer. Puntas de dedos, puntas de cuchillos. Lo mejor será levantarse enseguida, salirle al encuentro y preguntarle si piensa convertirse al judaísmo. Es demasiado idiota tenerle miedo; lo que pasa es que soy demasiado perezoso. Pero ella ha de traerme la comida enseguida, antes de servirle el pienso al pastor. Huguenau escucha con atención para averiguar si ya están sentándose a la mesa. No es extraño que uno adelgace más cada vez si Esch devora la comida de uno. Pero él es así. Un cura ha de tener barriga. Su traje de pastor es pura ficción y engaño. También el verdugo viste de negro. Un verdugo ha de comer mucho, necesita fuerzas. Nunca se sabe si vienen a buscarte para la ejecución o para darte la comida. A partir de ahora, se irá a la hospedería y devorará carne en la mesa del mayor. Desde esta misma noche. Como la tortilla tarde un poco más se armará una buena. ¡Para hacer una tortilla bastan cinco minutos!

La señora Esch entra sin hacer ruido en la habitación, deja el plato con la tortilla sobre una silla y acerca esta al sofá.

—¿No quiere que le prepare una infusión, señor Huguenau?

Huguenau alza la mirada. Su enfado casi ha desaparecido; sienta bien un poco de compasión.

—Tengo fiebre, señora Esch.

Ella debería pasarle un poco la mano por la frente para comprobar si tiene fiebre; le da rabia que no lo haga.

—Voy a meterme en la cama, mamá Esch.

Pero la señora Esch se queda inmóvil ante él, empeñada en meterle una infusión en el cuerpo: es una infusión estupenda, no solo por muy antigua, sino porque es un medicamento famoso; el hombre que mezcla las hierbas, según un secreto heredado de su padre y de su abuelo, se ha hecho rico, tiene una casa

en Colonia y toda la gente de la comarca acude a él como en peregrinación. Raras veces había ella hablado tanto sin perder el aliento.

Huguenau, sin embargo, no está de acuerdo:

—Una copita de kirsch me vendrá bien, señora Esch.

Ella puso cara de asco: ¿Licor? ¡Ni hablar! ¡Pero si ella ha acostumbrado a dar esta infusión incluso a su marido, cuya salud no era precisamente ejemplar!

—¿Ah, sí? ¿Esch toma esa infusión?

—Claro —dijo la señora Esch.

—Bueno, pues hágame usted una taza, en nombre de Dios. Y Huguenau se levantó suspirando y se comió la tortilla con voracidad.

LXXI

Extrañamente, la partida de Heinrich transcurrió sin dolor. En la medida en que las conveniencias físicas son separables de las espirituales, su partida fue un acontecimiento exclusivamente físico. Cuando Hanna regresó de la estación se sintió vacía, como una casa cuyas cortinas hubieran sido corridas. Eso era todo. Por lo demás, sabía con absoluta certeza que Heinrich regresaría de la guerra sano y salvo. Y con esta certidumbre, que le impedía convertir a Heinrich en un mártir, se había ahorrado no solo y por fortuna las efusiones sentimentales en la estación, que tanto horror le inspiraban, sino también, una vez superado lo desagradable de la despedida, el deseo de que Heinrich no regresara nunca, deseo que había sido relegado al dominio de lo vago e inofensivo. Cuando le decía al chico: «Pronto estará papá de nuevo con nosotros», los dos sabían qué quería decir.

El acontecimiento físico, como ella definía y con razón el permiso de seis semanas, se presentaba a su espíritu como un angostamiento de su corriente vital, como un estrechamiento de su Yo, como si su Yo se hubiera visto constreñido a los límites de su cuerpo, como las aguas de un río que cruzan, todo espumas, por una garganta. Pensando en ello, siempre había tenido la sensación de que su Yo no quedaba delimitado por su piel y que, a través de los poros de esa piel, podía llegar hasta la ropa interior de seda que llevaba junto al cuerpo; le parecía que sus trajes albergaban una emanación de su Yo —de ahí su gran seguridad en cuestiones de moda—; sí, casi le parecía que ese Yo vivía fuera del cuerpo, como envolviéndolo más que como habitándolo, que ese cuerpo no podía seguir elaborando en su cabeza pensamientos, sino que, de algún modo, se hallaba fuera de ella, en un puesto de observación más elevado, por así decirlo, puesto desde el cual podía contemplar su propia corporeidad como, por muy importante que fuera, una insignificancia minúscula; así pues, de aquel período de seis semanas, de aquel acontecimiento físico, de aquel precipitarse bruscamente a través de una garganta, de toda aquella amplia dimensionalidad difusa, solo había quedado una bruma brillante, un resplandeciente reflejo irisado flotando sobre la turbulencia de las aguas, último refugio del alma, en cierto modo. Pero ahora que las aguas volvían a su plácido cauce, lo que, al mismo tiempo, suponía una liberación, aquel suspiro de alivio y aquel allanar los pliegues se convertían también en el deseo de olvidar la turbulenta garganta. Olvido que, desde luego, solo en parte se conseguía. Todo lo personal se había desdibujado relativamente deprisa: el comportamiento de Heinrich, su voz, sus palabras, su modo de andar; todo esto había desaparecido muy pronto; en cambio, lo general permanecía. O, usando una metáfora indecorosa, primero desapareció el rostro, después todo lo que en él tenía movimiento, manos y pies, pero el cuerpo, inmóvil y pétreo, aquel torso, que iba desde la cavidad torácica hasta más allá de las caderas, aquella imagen, la más lasciva del hombre, permanecía en la profundidad de su memoria, imagen de un dios muellemente cobijada en la tierra o acariciada por las olas a orillas del mar Tirreno. Y cuanto más deprisa avanzaba el olvido —esto era precisamente lo espantoso— y más se reducía, trozo a trozo, la imagen del dios, más se concentraba y aislaba su lascivia, lascivia de la que el olvido, impotente frente a ella, se apoderaba cada vez con mayor lentitud, a trozos más pequeños. Pero esto es solo un símbolo y, como todos los símbolos, envilece el auténtico estado de cosas, que, permaneciendo siempre en la penumbra, es una corriente de confusas ideas que se entremezclan, un flujo y reflujo de recuerdos a medias recordados, de pensamientos pensados a medias, de medias voliciones, un río sin riberas cubierto de una bruma plateada, hálito argénteo que llega hasta las nubes y hasta los negros astros. Por ello aquel torso sumido en las espumeantes aguas del río no era un torso: era un guijarro afilado, el fragmento de un mueble, un desecho casero o cualquier desperdicio doméstico lanzados en la corriente del acontecer, un terrón de tierra arrojado a las olas de la orilla: las olas sucedían a las olas, el día envolvía a la noche y la noche al día, y resultaba muy confuso discernir lo que, al sucederse, traían los días en su seno, más confuso aún que discernir los sueños, que también se sucedían interminables. A veces en todo ello se ocultaba algo que evocaba el secreto conocimiento de las colegialas y que, no obstante, despertaba de algún modo el deseo de huir de tales conocimientos infantiles para refugiarse en lo individual y volver a arrancar del olvido el rostro de

Heinrich. Pero este era solo un deseo cuya realización habría ofrecido al menos tantas posibilidades diferentes como restauraciones admite un torso griego hallado bajo tierra; es decir, era un deseo irrealizable.

A primera vista podría parecer que el hecho de que en la memoria de Hanna predominara o bien lo individual o bien lo general carece de importancia. Pero en una época en que lo general se ha impuesto de modo ostensible, en que los lazos sociales que unen a los humanos de individuo en individuo han sido desatados, en favor de conceptos colectivos de una uniformidad hasta ahora jamás sospechada, en una época en que ha surgido un estado de desindividualización cuya crueldad solo es propia de la infancia o de la senectud, en una época así, pues, la memoria individual no puede escapar a tales reglas generales, y la vida solitaria de una mujer sumamente insignificante, por muy bella y buena compañera de cama que sea para su compañero, no puede explicarse, desgraciadamente, por la frustración o por el desengaño de la satisfacción sexual; antes al contrario, esa vida solitaria constituye una parte del todo, refleja, como cualquier destino individual, un poder metafísico que pende sobre el mundo, un acontecer físico, si se quiere, pero pese a ello metafísico en lo que tiene de trágico: porque ese valor trágico se traduce por aislamiento del Yo.

LXXII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 13

Esta época, esta vida que se desintegra, ¿tiene todavía una realidad? Mi pasividad aumenta de día en día, no solo porque me desgasto contra una realidad que podría ser más fuerte que yo, sino porque por todas partes choco contra la irrealidad. Soy del todo consciente de que solo es posible hallar el sentido y el *ethos* de mi vida en la actividad, pero intuyo que en esta época ya no hay tiempo para la única actividad verdadera: la actividad contemplativa del filósofo. Yo intento filosofar, pero ¿dónde ha quedado la dignidad del conocimiento? ¿No ha muerto hace tiempo? ¿La misma filosofía no se ha desintegrado en meras palabras ante el derrumbamiento de su objeto? Este mundo sin esencia, mundo sin quietud, este mundo que solo encuentra y mantiene su equilibrio en la rapidez, cada vez mayor, este mundo ha convertido su precipitación en actividad aparente del hombre para arrastrarlo hacia la nada. ¡Oh! ¿Existe acaso resignación más profunda que la de una época incapaz de filosofar? ¡Incluso filosofar se ha convertido en un juego estético, un juego inexistente, caído en los engranajes del Mal: una ocupación de burgueses que se aburren por las noches! ¡No nos queda sino el número, no nos queda sino la Ley!

A menudo pienso que el estado de ánimo que me domina y que me retiene en esta vivienda judía no puede seguir siendo calificado de resignación, sino de sabiduría, una sabiduría que ha aprendido a coexistir con el despego general que lo cubre todo. Porque incluso Nuchem y Marie son para mí unos extraños, ellos, en quienes había puesto mi última esperanza: la esperanza de que fueran mi creación, la dulce e irrealizable esperanza de haber tomado su destino en mis manos para determinarlo. Nuchem y Marie no son mis criaturas ni lo han sido jamás.

¿Posee el mundo existencia propia? No. ¿Poseen Nuchem y Marie existencia propia? Seguro que no, porque no existe ser alguno que tenga una vida propia. Pero las instancias que determinan los destinos se hallan muy lejos de mi esfera de poder y de mi esfera de pensamiento. Yo mismo solo puedo cumplir mi propia ley, la tarea que me ha sido impuesta solo a mí; no soy capaz de ir más allá. Y, aunque mi amor por las criaturas Nuchem y Marie no se extinga, aunque yo no desfallezca en la lucha por sus almas y sus destinos, las instancias de que dependen me siguen siendo inaccesibles, se me ocultan, como se me oculta el abuelo de barba blanca al que, desde luego, encuentro a veces en el vestíbulo, pero cuya forma real solo se manifiesta en el cuarto eternamente cerrado para mí, y que solo se relaciona conmigo a través de su delegado Litwak. Tan ocultas se hallan para mí esas instancias como el general de la blanca barba, el general Booth, cuyo retrato cuelga en la sala de visitas del hospicio. Y si reflexiono como es debido, resulta que no estoy en lucha ni con el abuelo ni con el general del Ejército de Salvación, sino que me esfuerzo en hacerles justicia, y mis esfuerzos en favor de Nuchem y Marie también a ellos van dirigidos. Sí, a veces creo que depende exclusivamente de mí el lograr con mis actos el amor de esos ancianos, a fin de que me bendigan y no muera en soledad.

¿Es esto resignación? ¿Es rechazo de todo lo estético? ¿Dónde me hallaba yo antes? Mi vida va apagándose detrás de mí y no sé si la he vivido o me la han contado: tan sumergida está en los mares lejanos. ¿Me llevaron barcos hasta allí, hasta las lejanas playas del lejano este y del lejano oeste? ¿He sido recolector de algodón en las plantaciones de América? ¿Fui yo, allá en la jungla de la India, el cazador blanco de elefantes? Todo es posible, nada es inverosímil, ni siquiera un castillo en un parque sería inverosímil, todo es posible, altura y profundidad, porque en esta dinámica nada ha quedado que esté ahí por su propia voluntad, aparente en su trabajo, aparente en su tranquilidad y en su claridad: no ha

quedado nada. Mi Yo ha sido arrojado fuera, expulsado a la Nada, irrealizables los anhelos, inasequible la Tierra Prometida, invisible la cada vez mayor luminosidad, jamás alcanzable, y la comunidad que buscamos es una comunidad sin fuerza, pero llena de mala voluntad. Esperanza inútil, arrogancia a menudo sin fundamento: el mundo sigue siendo un enemigo desconocido, menos aún que un enemigo, algo extraño cuya superficie sin duda puedo tocar, pero en cuyo interior nunca he logrado penetrar, algo extraño en cuyo interior jamás penetraré, algo extraño en constante y progresiva extrañeza, algo ciego en constante y progresiva ceguera, algo que se pierde y se derrumba en el recuerdo de la noche de la tierra natal para concluir por ser un hálito del pasado que se descompone, y nada más. He recorrido muchos caminos para hallar Uno, aquel donde desembocan todos los demás, pero esos caminos siempre conducían a otros lugares y Dios mismo no era determinado por mí sino por los antepasados.

Le dije a Nuchem:

—Sois un pueblo desconfiado, un pueblo perverso; incluso a Dios controláis una y otra vez, continuamente, en su propio Libro.

Él me contestó:

—La Ley es inmutable; Dios solo existirá cuando de la lectura de la Ley se haya deducido todo lo que esta encierra.

Le dije a Marie:

—Sois un pueblo valiente, pero que no piensa. Creéis que con ser buenos y tocar vuestra música de feria basta para atraer a Dios.

Ella me contestó:

—La alegría que nos da Dios es Dios mismo; su gracia es inagotable.

Me dije a mí mismo:

—Eres un imbécil, eres un platónico, crees que abarcando el mundo con una mirada de comprensión podrás formarlo a tu imagen y llegar a fundirte en Dios. ¿No comprendes que así te desangras?

Me contesté:

—Sí, me desangro.

LXXIII

Degradación de los valores 9

Digresión sobre la teoría del conocimiento

¿Tiene esta época todavía realidad? ¿Posee una realidad de valores en la que se conserve el sentido de la vida? ¿Existe una realidad para el no-sentido de una no-vida? ¿Dónde se ha refugiado la realidad? ¿En la ciencia?, ¿en las leyes?, ¿en el deber? ¿O en la duda de una lógica eternamente inquisitiva y cuyo punto de plausibilidad se ha perdido en el infinito? Hegel auguró a la historia «el camino hacia la liberación de la sustancia espiritual», el camino hacia la autoliberación de lo espiritual… camino que se ha convertido en la ruta hacia el autodescuartizamiento de todos los valores.

Ciertamente, poco importa que la construcción hegeliana de la historia haya sido refutada por la guerra mundial (de ello ya se ha encargado el número siete asignado a los planetas), pues la realidad, convertida en autónoma mediante un proceso de cuatrocientos años, nunca fue, bajo ninguna circunstancia, tan capaz de doblegarse ante un sistema deductivo ni estuvo más inclinada a hacerlo. Más importante sería inquirir las posibilidades lógicas de esta realidad antideductiva, inquirir las causas de tal antideducción, inquirir en suma «los condicionamientos de la experiencia posible», según los cuales debió de producirse este desarrollo de lo espiritual, pero el desprecio de todo lo filosófico y el cansancio de la palabra forman sin duda parte de esta realidad y de este desarrollo y, así, las apremiantes cuestiones metodológicas —¿qué es un acontecer histórico?, ¿qué es la unidad histórica? o, abarcando más aún, ¿qué es, de suyo, un acontecer?, ¿qué deducción se necesita para que los hechos aislados se reúnan y formen la unidad del acontecer?—, las apremiantes cuestiones metodológicas, pues, solo se formulan con la mayor de las desconfianzas puesta en la fuerza persuasiva de las palabras.

La unión entre la vida autónoma y la categoría de los valores es tan indisoluble y tan propia de su misma esencia como la unión entre lo consciente autónomo y la categoría de la verdad; para fenómenos como valor y verdad podrían buscarse otros nombres, pero seguirían siendo fenómenos, tan irrefutables como los mismos *sum* y *cogito*, deducidos ambos de la autonomía del Yo, carente de conexiones con el exterior, siendo los dos acto y ejecución de ese Yo. Por tanto, el valor se escinde en un acto ejecutor de valores, un acto —en el más amplio sentido de la palabra— formador del mundo y, por último, en la realización ya formada —especialmente visible, universalmente visible— del valor. El concepto del valor se disgrega en categorías complementarias: el valor ético del acto y el valor estético de lo realizado,

anverso y reverso de la misma moneda, por cuya cohesión y solo por ella constituyen el concepto de valor en su más amplio sentido y el lugar lógico de toda vida. De hecho siempre ha sido así a lo largo de la historia: la formulación histórica de los antiguos ya se hallaba sometida a su concepto de los valores, la historia moralizante del siglo XVIII empleó los suyos de modo absolutamente consciente y en la concepción misma de Hegel aparece clarísimo el valor absoluto, tanto en el concepto de «espíritu del mundo» como en el concepto «tarea de juzgar la historia». Por ello no es de extrañar que la función metodológica del concepto de valor se convirtiera en el tema básico de la historia de la filosofía posthegeliana, si bien, claro está, con el consiguiente y fatal resultado: la desintegración del conocimiento global en un conocimiento de las ciencias naturales, ajeno al valor, y en un conocimiento de las ciencias del espíritu, sometido al valor. Si se quiere, esta es la primera explicación de la bancarrota de la filosofía, porque, con dicha desintegración, la identidad del pensar y del ser quedó confiada al ámbito lógico-matemático y, en todos los demás campos del conocimiento, tan idealista tarea, la principal de la filosofía, quedó abolida o, como mucho, relegada a la vaguedad de la intuición.

Hegel reprochó (con justicia) a Schelling que hubiera proyectado sobre el mundo lo Absoluto como «un proyectil disparado con una pistola». Pero lo mismo puede decirse, sin embargo, del propio concepto de valor de la filosofía hegeliana y, también, de la posthegeliana. Proyectar pura y simplemente el concepto del valor en la historia y designar como «valor» a secas todo aquello que ha sido conservado por la historia es algo que, en último caso, todavía les está permitido a los puros valores estéticos del arte plástico, pero, por el contrario, no es cierto en cambio que, en un sentido más amplio, uno se sienta necesariamente impulsado a explicar la historia como un conglomerado de no-valores y a negar, de modo rotundo, toda realidad de valores a la historia.

Primera tesis

La historia se compone de valores, porque la vida solo se concibe bajo la categoría de valor, pero estos valores no pueden ser introducidos en la realidad como absolutos, solo pueden ser pensados en conexión con un sujeto de valores ético, actuante y realizador de valores. Con su «espíritu del mundo» absoluto y objetivado, Hegel ha puesto en la realidad este sujeto de valores, pero su construcción tenía que conducir al absurdo por su carácter absoluto y universal (y ahí se puso una vez más de manifiesto la insalvable barrera de infinito del pensamiento deductivo). Solo existen posiciones finitas. Donde existe un sujeto de valores concreto, finito a priori, o sea, una persona concreta, la relativización de los valores y su dependencia del sujeto introducido son del todo transparentes; la biografía de una persona surge mediante designación de todos los contenidos de valores que han sido importantes para ella. La persona como tal puede vivir por completo al margen del valor, ser incluso hostil al valor como, por ejemplo, un capitán de bandoleros o un desertor, pero, como centro de valores, rodeado del círculo de valores que le es propio, está, pese a ello, a punto para la biografía y para la historia. Y lo mismo sucede con los centros de valores ficticios: la historia de un Estado, de un club, de una nación, de la Hansa alemana, incluso la historia de objetos inanimados como, por ejemplo, la historia arquitectónica de una casa, se forman escogiendo los hechos que, caso de haber existido una voluntad de valor, habrían sido importantes para el centro de valores correspondiente. Un acontecimiento sin centro de valores se disuelve en la niebla; la batalla de Kunersdorf no consiste en la lista de los granaderos que en ella intervinieron, sino en las configuraciones de la realidad que sirven de base a los planes del general de división. Toda unidad histórica depende de un centro de valores efectivo o ficticio; el «estilo» de una época, y la época misma como acontecimiento histórico, no existirían si en su centro no se estableciera el principio de selección unificante, un «espíritu de la época», que regula la fuerza capaz de establecer valores y la fuerza capaz de formar el estilo. O, para emplear una expresión desusada: La cultura es un producto del valor, la cultura solo puede ser pensada mediante un concepto de estilo y, para ello, para poder pensarla de un modo absoluto, es preciso recurrir al «espíritu de la cultura», que sitúa al estilo y a los valores en el centro del círculo de valores que representa la cultura.

¿Significa esto una revalorización de todos los valores? ¿Una renuncia a la esperanza toda de que, con la unidad del pensar y del ser, lo absoluto del Logos se manifieste en la realidad? ¿La renuncia a la esperanza de que resulte posible recorrer, aunque solo sea por aproximación, el camino hacia la autoliberación del espíritu y de la humanidad?

Segunda tesis

La madurez que permite al acto formar parte de la historia o de la biografía está condicionada por lo absoluto del Logos. Pues el sujeto de valores, efectivo o ficticio, solo puede ser imaginado en el

aislamiento de su Yo, en aquella soledad platónica incompensable, carente de conexiones exteriores, soledad platónica cuyo orgullo consiste en depender exclusivamente de los dictados de la lógica y cuya obligación imperativa consiste en someter la acción a dicha plausibilidad lógica; pero, en el sentido estrictamente kantiano, esto no significa que solo tenga que exigirse la «buena voluntad» que cree la obra por la obra en sí, sino que hay que deducir además todas las consecuencias de la ley autónoma del Yo, a fin de que la obra, no influida por ningún dogmatismo, sea creada dentro de la pura originalidad de ese Yo y de esa ley. En otras palabras: lo que no surge puramente de su propia ley desaparece de la historia. Pero cuanto más influye esta ley propia en la época y, por consiguiente, condiciona el estilo y la época, tanto más tal condicionamiento de estilo puede solo ser una sombra degradada del Logos supraordenado, aquel Logos todavía hoy vigente y que constituye el pensamiento, aquel Logos que, hoy también y con toda seguridad, solo es una terrena sombra degradada, pero que, no obstante, aún resplandece a través de cualquier sombra degradada, y que, por su carácter supratemporal, hace posible que un pensamiento ligado a un estilo se proyecte en otro Yo. Y esta unidad formal básica aparece una y otra vez con absoluta claridad en el estrecho marco de la obra realizada y de la estética en general, o sea, en lo artístico. Y donde aparece con mayor claridad es en la indestructibilidad de las formas del arte.

Condensando todo la anterior, se llega a la

Tercera tesis

El mundo es una posición del Yo inteligible, pues la idea platónica no se ha perdido ni se perderá jamás. Pero esta posición no ha sido «disparada por una pistola»; siempre pueden establecerse otros sujetos de valores, sujetos de valores que a su vez reflejen la estructura del Yo inteligible y establezcan sus propios valores, sus propias formulaciones del mundo. El mundo no es una posición inmediata del Yo, sino su posición mediata, es «posición de posiciones», «posición de posiciones de posiciones», y así sucesivamente en reiteración infinita. En esta «posición de posiciones» recibe el mundo su organización metodológica y su jerarquización. Desde luego, la suya es una organización relativista, pero —atendiendo a la forma— es una organización absoluta, pues la exigencia ética a que están obligados los sujetos de valores, tanto efectivos como ficticios, sigue imponiéndose de un modo inevitable, mas con ella se impone también la validez inmanente del Logos dentro de la obra realizada. La lógica de las cosas permanece. Y aunque el progreso lógico de la historia se quiebre, necesariamente, una y otra vez, en cuanto se alcanzan los límites de infinitud de su construcción metafísica, y aunque la imagen platónica del mundo deba siempre ceder el paso a una visión positivista, la influencia de la idea platónica subsiste de una manera incoercible y es ella la que, en cualquier positivismo, toca siempre la tierra madre a fin de, arrastrada por el pathos de la experiencia, volver a levantar siempre la cabeza.

Toda unidad concebida en el mundo bajo una forma conceptual es «posición de posiciones»; todo concepto, toda cosa es «posición de posiciones», y es probable que esta función metodológica del conocimiento unificador, que solo puede aprehender las cosas como sujeto de valores autónomo y creador de valores, llegue hasta el interior del ámbito matemático, aboliendo así las diferencias existentes entre la estructura conceptual propia de las ciencias naturales y matemáticas y la estructura conceptual empírica. Porque la «posición de posiciones», considerada desde el punto de vista metodológico, no solo se limita a introducir un observador ideal en el campo de la observación —como han hecho desde hace mucho tiempo y al margen de los considerandos de la teoría del conocimiento los científicos empíricos, como, por ejemplo, los físicos de la teoría de la relatividad—, sino que la investigación de los fundamentos matemáticos ha llegado, con preguntas como «¿qué es el número?», «¿qué es la unidad?», a un punto en el que no cabe otra salida que el recurso de emergencia de la intuición, pero, a través del principio «posición de posiciones», la intuición recibe su legitimación lógica, pues la inserción del Yo en el sujeto de valores hipostático ¡puede considerarse justificadamente como estructura metodológica del acto intuitivo!

El hecho de que el principio de «posición de posiciones» haya permanecido tanto tiempo sin ser observado tal vez podría explicarse por su misma evidencia, por lo primitivo de su carácter. ¡Sí, primitivo! Y, para el orgullo del hombre, tener que admitir actitudes primitivas parece ser una carga insuperable. Porque, aunque el proceso de «posición de posiciones» garantice la penetración del Yo inteligible en todas las cosas del mundo, en la «posición de posiciones» —olvidando por un momento el trasfondo platónico— se da una animización universal de la naturaleza y, más aún, una animización universal del mundo en su totalidad, una animización universal que introduce en todas las cosas y en todos los conceptos, por abstractos que sean, un sujeto de valores, una animización solo comparable a la animización universal del mundo tal y como aparece en el pensamiento de los primitivos. Se diría que en el desarrollo de la lógica existe una especie de ontogénesis que mantiene vivas todas las formas antiguas y aparentemente muertas del pensamiento, incluso en la estructura lógica más altamente desarrollada (o sea, también aquellas formas de la animización directa), y que, por tanto, mantiene viva la forma primitiva de la cadena de

plausibilidad unimembre e imprime la forma a todos los pasos del pensamiento, aunque no al contenido de la metafísica primitiva. Esto es por cierto un insulto para los racionalistas; pero, en cambio, un consuelo para el sentimiento panteísta.

Y, no obstante, también se puede hallar aquí un consuelo para el ámbito racional. En efecto, si se interpreta la «posición de posiciones» como la estructura lógica del acto intuitivo, debido a su dependencia respecto al Logos, también puede verse en ella el «condicionamiento de la experiencia posible», para el —de otro modo inexplicable— acto de la comprensión entre un ser humano y otro, entre una soledad y otra soledad; o sea, que la «posición de posiciones» no solo proporciona la estructura de la teoría del conocimiento, que hace posible traducir todos los idiomas por muy distintos que sean entre sí, sino que además, y en terreno muchísimo más amplio, proporciona el denominador común de todo lenguaje humano, brinda también una garantía a la unidad de los hombres y a la humanidad del ser humano, el cual, incluso en el autodescuartizamiento de su existencia, sigue siendo imagen de Dios, pues, espejo de sí mismo en todos los conceptos y en cualquier unidad que él establezca, el hombre es reflejo del Logos, es reflejo del Verbo de Dios como medida de todas las cosas. Y aunque lo estable de este mundo, aunque sus valores estéticos sean abolidos y disueltos ante la obligación de preguntar y de dudar, la unidad del concepto se mantiene intacta, la exigencia ética permanece intacta; permanece intacta la rigurosidad del valor ético como función pura, realidad de la obligación de la más rigurosa observancia y, como tal, unidad permanente del mundo, unidad del ser humano, que aparece en todas las cosas, unidad no perdida e imposible de perder, situada por encima y más allá de los espacios y de las épocas.

LXXIV

El doctor Flurschütz ayudó a Jaretzki a colocarse la prótesis. También la enfermera Mathilde se hallaba junto a ellos.

Jaretzki tiró de las correas.

—Bueno, Flurschütz, ¿no le parte el corazón que el momento de la despedida se aproxime…? ¡Y no hablemos de la enfermera Mathilde!

—¿Sabe una cosa, Jaretzki? En realidad, me hubiera gustado retenerle aquí. Está usted pasando una mala temporada.

—No sé… espere… —Jaretzki intenta colocar un cigarrillo entre los dedos de la prótesis— … espere… ¿Qué le parecería si hiciéramos de esto una pitillera o un fumacigarrillos permanente? Sería ingenioso, ¿no?

—Estese quieto un momento, Jaretzki —Flurschütz ajustó las correas—. ¿Qué? ¿Cómo se siente ahora?

—Como una máquina recién nacida… una máquina en un período estupendo… Si los cigarrillos fueran mejores, no tendría nada que desear.

—¿No podría dejar el tabaco…? Y, naturalmente, lo otro…

—¿El amor? Desde luego, encantado.

La enfermera Mathilde aclaró sin necesidad:

—No, el doctor Flurschütz se refiere a la bebida.

—¡Ah, eso! No lo había pescado… Cuando se está sobrio cuesta mucho pescar las cosas… ¡Y que usted no se haya dado cuenta todavía, Flurschütz! Los hombres solo pueden entenderse cuando están bebidos.

—¡Eso es un arriesgado intento de justificación!

—Bien, Flurschütz, acuérdese usted de lo maravillosamente borrachos que estábamos el catorce de agosto, y nada más… Tengo la impresión de que aquella fue la primera y la última vez que existió un auténtico sentimiento de solidaridad.

—Algo parecido dice Scheler…

—¿Quién?

—Scheler. En *El genio de la guerra*… No es un buen libro.

—¡Ah, un libro…! Un libro no es nada… Pero quiero decirle algo, Flurschütz, y hablo en serio: deme usted otra borrachera, de la clase que sea; por ejemplo de morfina o de patriotismo o de comunismo, de cualquier cosa, de algo que emborrache del todo… Deme algo que despierte en todos nosotros un sentimiento de solidaridad, y yo le juro que dejaré la bebida… de la noche a la mañana.

Flurschütz reflexionó:

—Algo hay de verdad en todo eso… Pero si la borrachera y la solidaridad le son imprescindibles, existe un remedio muy simple, Jaretzki: enamórese usted.

—Por prescripción facultativa, muy bien… ¿Se ha enamorado usted alguna vez en cumplimiento de una orden, enfermera?

La enfermera Mathilde enrojeció; en su cuello plagado de pecas aparecieron dos líneas rojas.

Jaretzki dijo sin mirarla:

—Mala época para enamorarse… Me parece que todos estamos pasando una mala época… También para el amor es el fin… —intentó accionar las articulaciones de su prótesis—. En realidad, deberían adjuntar un folleto con las instrucciones para su manejo… Tendría que tener en alguna parte una articulación especial para los abrazos.

Flurschütz se sintió particularmente ofendido. Tal vez porque la enfermera Mathilde se hallaba presente. La enfermera Mathilde se sonrojó aún más:

—¡Qué cosas se le ocurren, señor Jaretzki!

—¿Por qué? Son ideas estupendas… Brazos artificiales para el amor… Sería un bonito detalle, modelos especiales para militares con graduación superior, desde coronel hacia arriba… Montaré una fábrica.

—¿Siempre ha de hacer usted el papel de *enfant terrible*? —dijo Flurschütz.

—No, simplemente tengo ideas para la industria de armamentos… Y ahora, cambiemos el disco.

Jaretzki comenzó a soltar las correas; la enfermera Mathilde le ayudó. Él manipuló las articulaciones de los dedos artificiales hasta colocarlos rectos:

—Eso es, y ahora les pondremos un guante… Este pide pan, este dice que no hay, este dice compraremos…

Flurschütz observó la cicatriz del muñón, ahora al descubierto:

—Creo que ajusta a la perfección. Solo ha de tener cuidado para que al principio no se llague por efecto del roce.

—… este dice robaremos y este dice dame la mano del pilón para matar a ese grandísimo ladrón.

—Bueno, Jaretzki, con usted no existe la menor posibilidad de entendimiento.

LXXV

Naturalmente no sirvió de nada que Huguenau se ocultara de Esch a la hora de comer. Aquella misma noche tuvieron un horroroso altercado. Bien es verdad que Esch quedó desarmado enseguida, pues Huguenau no solo esgrimió sus derechos de editor, archidemostrables por escrito, derechos que le permitían insertar los artículos que a él le pareciera, sino que además recurrió a los argumentos del propio Esch:

—Querido amigo —dijo con tono sarcástico—, usted se ha quejado muchas veces de que le siegan la hierba bajo los pies cuando intenta descubrir las irregularidades públicas… Y ahora que otro se atreve a hacerlo, usted esconde el rabo entre las piernas… ¡Claro, no es cosa de indisponerse con el comandante de la plaza…! Hay que navegar a favor del viento, ¿no?

Esch tuvo que soportar argumentos como este y, aunque había sido un ataque indigno y aleve, un ataque por la espalda, no supo sino contestar con la expresión de Götz3 y, luego, callarse.

Pero Huguenau, con astuto golpe de timón, se dirigió hacia la señora Esch para quejarse amargamente de que su marido tratara con tanta dureza a un concienzudo colaborador, y todo ¿por qué?, pues muy sencillo: porque él cumplía con su deber a conciencia y con absoluto desinterés. No cayó esto en el vacío y, al día siguiente, cuando Esch fue a comer, se encontró con un Huguenau enfadado y ofendido y con una esposa que, con palabras conciliadoras, había tomado bajo su protección la inocencia del señor Huguenau, de modo que, antes de que se diera cuenta, se hallaban los tres comiendo la sopa y juntos y en buena armonía, y a mayor satisfacción de la señora Esch, quien ya temía perder un huésped que jamás economizaba alabanzas.

Pero es posible que también a Esch le pareciera acertado evitar la batalla definitiva, que habría concluido poniendo a Huguenau en la calle; uno no sabía bien qué manejos podía esgrimir aún ese fulano contra el mayor… Por ello era más que conveniente no perderlo de vista. Y así fue como Huguenau se quedó; no obstante, las comidas no solían transcurrir en un ambiente acogedor, sobre todo porque Esch había adquirido la costumbre de escudriñar con desconfianza a su compañero de mesa por encima de los platos.

Huguenau —en su honor hay que decirlo— procuraba por todos los medios levantar los ánimos, pero con éxito solo relativo. También hoy, pese a que habían transcurrido ocho días, se mostraba Esch por su parte igualmente insoportable. Y a las tímidas preguntas de su esposa se limitaba a responder con un gruñido sordo:

—Emigrar a América…

Después nadie pronunció una sola palabra más.

Por último, con el estómago lleno y apoyándose en el respaldo de la silla, Huguenau rompió el embarazoso silencio con unas palabras esperanzadoras:

—Mamá Esch —dijo levantando un dedo—, mamá Esch, he encontrado un campesino que nos proporcionará harina y tal vez un jamón.

—¿Ah, sí? —dijo Esch, desconfiado—. ¿Y dónde lo ha pescado usted?

Dicho campesino no existía, naturalmente, pero lo que no es puede llegar a ser, y a Huguenau le molestó que jamás se reconociera su buena voluntad. Sin embargo, él no deseaba enzarzarse en otra disputa con Esch, al contrario, quería decirle algo amable:

—Hay que facilitarle un poco las cosas a mamá Esch… Cuatro bocas… Me asombra que consiga salir del paso… Porque hay que contar a la pequeña.

Esch sonrió:

—Sí, claro, la pequeña.

—¿Dónde se ha metido ahora? —dijo Huguenau con tono solícito.

La señora Esch suspiró:

—Tiene usted toda la razón. Hoy en día no es fácil contentar cuatro bocas… Todo iría mejor si mi marido no nos hubiera colgado del cuello a la pequeña.

—En eso no admito críticas —estalló Esch, miró con rabia a su mujer que, sin moverse de su asiento, sonreía con sensación de culpabilidad; después se tranquilizó un poco—. Si no existe una nueva vida, todo ha muerto.

—Sí, claro —dijo la señora Esch.

—Pero se pasa el día correteando por las calles —dijo Huguenau— con los chicos. Tenga cuidado o acabará por escapársele de las manos.

—¡Qué va!, le encanta estar con nosotros —dijo la señora Esch.

Y Esch, con cuidado, casi como si tocara a una mujer encinta, alargó el brazo hasta el antebrazo de su mujer:

—Eso quería yo decir, que en casa está a gusto, ¿no?

A Huguenau, el matrimonio Esch le dio rabia:

—A mí también me gusta estar aquí, mamá Esch… ¿No le gustaría adoptarme a mí?

Le hubiera gustado añadir que, si lo hacía, Esch podría tener aquel hijo del que siempre estaba diciendo chocheces, el que debía construir la casa, pero, por algún motivo que ni a él mismo se le alcanzaba, se sentía profundamente indignado y todo aquel asunto había dejado de parecerle chistoso. Si Esch se hubiera levantado de pronto para amenazarle, no le habría sorprendido. No cabía la menor duda de que lo mejor era ahuecar el ala e ir en busca de Marguerite; seguro que estaba en el patio. Pero mejor aún sería huir con Marguerite.

También la señora Esch parecía asustada por la proposición hecha por Huguenau, y, mientras le miraba fijamente y con la boca abierta, sintió la huesuda mano de Esch en torno a su brazo. Huguenau ya se había levantado, pero hasta que no llegó a la puerta no pudo ella balbucear:

—¿Y por qué no, señor Huguenau?

Huguenau aún tuvo tiempo de oír esta respuesta, pero aquellas palabras no bastaron para suavizar la viva indignación que sentía contra Esch. Encontró a Marguerite abajo y le regaló un marco entero:

—Para el viaje —le dijo—, pero has de vestirte adecuadamente… Ponerte unos pantalones que abriguen… Deja que te mire… Me da la sensación de que vas desnuda… y comienza a hacer frío.

LXXVI

Eran las nueve dadas cuando sonó el timbre en casa del doctor Kessel. Kuhlenbeck, con un puro entre los dientes, se hallaba sentado en una esquina del sofá.

—¡Vaya, Kessel, otro paciente!

—¿Y quién iba a ser si no? —respondió Kessel que, automáticamente, se había puesto en pie—. ¿Qué será…? Ni por las noches le dejan a uno descansar.

Y, con aire fatigado, se dirigió a la habitación contigua en busca de su maletín.

Entretanto había subido la criada:

—Señor doctor, señor doctor, abajo está el mayor.

—¿Quién? —gritó Kessel desde la habitación de al lado.

—El comandante.

—Esto me atañe a mí —dijo Kuhlenbeck.

—Enseguida va —gritó Kessel saliendo precipitadamente, con el maletín aún en la mano, a recibir al visitante.

El mayor estaba en la puerta; sonrió con embarazo:

—Sabía que los señores estarían reunidos… Y como usted, doctor Kessel, me invitó tan amablemente… He pensado que estarían haciendo música.

—Bueno, ¡gracias a Dios…! Temía que hubiera vuelto a suceder algo —dijo Kuhlenbeck—. Menos mal que no ha sido así.

—No, no ha sucedido nada —dijo el mayor.

—¿No se trata entonces de ningún motín? —preguntó Kuhlenbeck con su acostumbrada falta de tacto, y encima añadió—: ¿A quién se le ha ocurrido insertar en *El Mensajero* aquella nota estúpida? ¿A Esch o a ese bufón de apellido francés?

El mayor no contestó; las preguntas de Kuhlenbeck le hacían sentirse incómodo. Se arrepintió de haber venido. Pero Kuhlenbeck prosiguió:

—Bueno, no creo que aquellos señores lo pasen precisamente bien en la cárcel… Pero están lejos del frente y eso debería bastarles para mantenerse tranquilos. No piensan en el regalo que el destino les ha hecho dejándolos vivir, simplemente vivir, aunque sea en condiciones miserables… El hombre tiene mala memoria.

—Cosas de periodistas —dijo el mayor; en realidad aquello no era una contestación.

—He creído que me volvían a llamar —dijo el doctor Kessel—. Ojalá no haya más interrupciones por hoy.

Kuhlenbeck continuó hablando:

—En estos tiempos, mantener las cárceles en servicio es un lujo inaudito por parte del Estado… Además es un lujo inútil… El mundo entero es una cárcel… De todos modos, no durará mucho tiempo… Por otra parte, la penitenciaría de aquí tendría que haber sido evacuada hace ya tiempo… ¿Qué haremos con toda esa gente cuando todos nosotros emigremos?

—Todavía no hemos llegado a eso —dijo el mayor—, ni se llegará, con la ayuda de Dios.

Eso dijo, pero no lo creía así. Aquella misma tarde había vuelto a recibir órdenes secretas con las instrucciones a seguir en caso de una posible evacuación de la ciudad. Órdenes y contraórdenes se cruzaban y nadie sabía qué traería la hora siguiente. Era una inmundicia.

Kuhlenbeck contempló sus enormes manazas de cirujano:

—Si los franceses llegan hasta aquí… estoy seguro de que acabaremos con ellos solo con las manos.

—A veces pienso que ha sido una suerte que mi esposa no haya tenido que vivir estos tiempos —dijo Kessel.

Miró la fotografía que, con un crespón negro y una corona de laurel, se veía sobre el piano. También el Mayor levantó la vista hacia la fotografía:

—Su señora esposa, ¿también era músico? —preguntó finalmente.

Junto al piano había un violonchelo metido en una funda gris bordada con una lira roja y dos flautas cruzadas. ¿Por qué había venido? ¿Por qué había acudido a ver a los dos médicos? ¿Se sentía enfermo? Pero ¡si a él no le gustaban los médicos! Todos son librepensadores y de poco fiar. No saben qué cosa es el honor. Ahí estaba el médico jefe de Estado Mayor, sentado en una esquina del sofá, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, lanzando al aire volutas de humo y con la puntiaguda barba apuntando al techo. Todo aquello carecía de honorabilidad. ¿Por qué había venido? Claro que era mejor estar aquí que en la solitaria habitación de la hospedería, o en el comedor, donde en cualquier momento podía aparecer aquel hombre, Huguenau. Kessel había dispuesto que trajeran otra botella de Bernkasteler y el mayor se tomó un vaso con premura.

—Creía que tocarían ustedes un poco.

Kessel sonrió con aire ausente:

—Sí, mi mujer era muy aficionada a la música.

—¿Por qué no coge usted un poco su violonchelo —dijo Kuhlenbeck—, que está ahí mismo, Kessel? A todos nos vendría bien.

El mayor comprendió que, con ello, Kuhlenbeck se proponía brindarle un gesto de amistad, aunque tal vez pecara de excesiva familiaridad. Pero se limitó a decir:

—Sí, sería muy agradable.

Kessel se acercó al violonchelo y, mientras echaba una mirada a la fotografía, le quitó la funda. Pero luego quedó perplejo:

—Sí, pero ¿quién me acompañará?

—Usted solo lo hará muy bien, Kessel —dijo Kuhlenbeck—. Ánimo. —Kessel dudó todavía un poco:

—Bueno, pero ¿qué toco?

—Algo para el espíritu —dijo Kuhlenbeck.

Kessel acercó una silla al piano y se sentó junto a este, como si alguien se dispusiera a acompañarle. Golpeó una tecla, pulsó las cuerdas y afinó el instrumento. Después cerró los ojos.

Tocó la *Sonata para violonchelo en mi menor*, opus 38, de Brahms. Su rostro de suaves facciones adquirió una extraña expresión interior, su bigote gris sobre los apretados labios ya no era un bigote, sino una leve sombra gris, las arrugas de las mejillas no seguían ya la misma dirección, ya no era un rostro, su rostro se había transformado en algo casi invisible, tal vez en un paisaje de otoño que espera que nieve. Y cuando una lágrima se deslizó a lo largo de su nariz, tampoco era ya una lágrima. Únicamente su mano era todavía una mano que, a cada golpe de arco, parecía atraer sobre sí toda la vida, elevándola y hundiéndola según las oleadas de la suave y difusa corriente de las notas, corriente que iba amplificándose

y envolviendo al músico, que tocaba de tal forma que estaba solo y aislado. Tocaba. Probablemente solo era un diletante, pero eso poco podía importarles a él, al mayor, y, sin duda, a Kuhlenbeck, porque, en aquel momento, el mutismo ruidoso de la época, el estallido de mudo e impenetrable alboroto que se interpone entre el ser humano y su prójimo, muro que impide el paso de la voz humana hacia uno y hacia otro lado, de modo que el hombre no puede evitar un estremecimiento, ese mutismo escalofriante de la época había sido abolido, el tiempo mismo había sido abolido para convertirse en espacio, un espacio que, mientras sonaba el violonchelo de Kessel, los abarcaba a todos; las notas surgían, edificando espacio, colmando el espacio, colmándolos a ellos mismos.

Cuando cesó la música y el doctor Kessel volvió a ser el doctor Kessel, el mayor se echó un poco hacia atrás para ocultar, tras la actitud rígida del militar, su emoción. Y esperó que Kessel dijera algo consolador, ¡era el momento oportuno para decirlo! Pero el doctor Kessel se limitó a inclinar la cabeza y mostrar los ralos rizos —nada del cepillo tieso y gris de Esch— que le cubrían ligeramente la calva. Casi avergonzado recogió el instrumento, lo metió en la funda, gesto que causó una impresión casi indecente, y solo Kuhlenbeck dijo, desde la esquina del sofá:

—Ajajá.

Tal vez los tres se sentían avergonzados. Al fin, Kuhlenbeck dijo:

—¡Ajajá! Desde luego los médicos tienen un gran sentido musical.

El mayor rebuscó en su memoria. En su juventud había tenido un amigo —¿había sido en verdad un amigo?— que tocaba el violín, pero no era médico, aunque… es posible que lo fuera o que quisiera serlo. La memoria le falló, se le paralizó, el movimiento se estancó, y el mayor solo veía su desnuda mano apoyada sobre la tela negra del uniforme. Y sus labios se movieron contra su voluntad:

—Desnudos y sin cubrir…

—¿Cómo? —dijo Kuhlenbeck.

El mayor se volvió hacia él:

—Nada… Tiempos difíciles… Muchas gracias, doctor Kessel.

Ahora habló también Kessel:

—Sí, en efecto, en los tiempos que corren, la música es un consuelo… Poca cosa más nos queda.

Kuhlenbeck dio un porrazo sobre la mesa:

—No nos pongamos melancólicos… Aunque el mundo estuviera plagado de demonios, el que está vivo no tiene derecho a desesperarse… Dejen que llegue la paz y ¡verán cómo nos rehacemos!

El mayor movió la cabeza:

—Ante una miserable traición, se siente uno impotente del todo.

Vio ante él la imagen de Esch, aquel rostro amarillento y oscuro, de sonrisa agresiva, esa era la palabra exacta, agresiva, aquel rostro que no obstante parecía en cierto modo pedir perdón… Tenía la expresión llena de reproches de un caballo al que se ha hecho caer.

—Nosotros los alemanes siempre hemos sido traicionados —dijo Kuhlenbeck—, y, no obstante, vivimos. —Alzó el vaso—. ¡Viva Alemania!

También el mayor levantó su vaso y pensó: «Alemania». Pensó en un orden digno y en la sensación de protección que le había proporcionado Alemania hasta el presente. Dejó de ver Alemania. En cierto modo, hacía responsable a Huguenau de las desgracias de la patria, de las marchas de tropas atravesando las poblaciones, de las contradictorias órdenes del alto mando militar, de las armas que, impropias de caballeros, se empleaban en la guerra de gases, del desorden general que iba imponiéndose. Y casi deseó que la imagen de Esch se fundiera con la de Huguenau y se desvaneciera, demostrando así que ambos eran representantes del Mal, dos aventureros surgidos del enmarañado embrollo que, lleno de negocios y rostros, resultaba incomprensible, sospechosos ambos e inmerecedores de confianza, culpables los dos, demoníacamente culpables del catastrófico final de la guerra.

—Yo ya no quiero saber nada… —dijo Kessel—. Cumplo con mi deber, pero no quiero saber nada más.

La vida era un laberinto, la red inextricable del Mal se cernía sobre el mundo, y el estruendo mudo y ensordecedor volvía a empezar. Aquel que se aparta de la estrecha senda del Evangelio es un pecador, como pecadora había sido la esperanza puesta en que la gracia podía cumplirse en lo terrenal, anunciada por la voz del amigo, voz que destruye el mutismo y la rigidez de los tanques, voz que libera la soledad conduciéndola hacia una dulce corriente de acercamiento. Y el mayor dijo:

—Nos hemos apartado de la senda del deber y hemos de sufrir el castigo.

—¡Ni hablar, comandante! —dijo Kuhlenbeck riendo—. Yo no estoy dispuesto a eso. En cambio, sí estoy dispuesto a seguir la senda que me lleve a casa, para que nuestro fatigado Kessel pueda por fin irse a la cama.

Se levantó, la guerrera del uniforme hacía anchas arrugas en torno a su corpulento cuerpo. «Un civil disfrazado», pensó el mayor sin poderlo evitar; no era el uniforme imperial. El mayor Von Pasenow se había levantado también. ¿A qué había venido él aquí, él, que llevaba el uniforme imperial? El deber terrenal es imagen del mandato de Dios, y el servicio a algo superior a uno mismo obliga al hombre a

someterse a ideas más elevadas, le exige que entregue hasta la última gota de su libertad individual, si es preciso. Obediencia voluntaria, sí; esa era la postura determinada por Dios, todo lo demás debía considerarse como no existente. El mayor se alisó la guerrera, se llevó la mano a la cinta de la Cruz de Hierro y, en la rígida actitud militar que adoptó al despedirse, volvió a encontrar la claridad y la sensación de seguridad que el deber y el uniforme proporcionan al hombre.

El doctor Kessel les acompañó hasta el pie de la escalera. Ya en la puerta de la calle, el mayor dijo con tono un tanto ceremonioso:

—Gracias, doctor Kessel, por el placer artístico que nos ha proporcionado usted.

Kessel dudó un poco antes de contestar y luego dijo en voz baja:

—Soy yo quien ha de estar agradecido… Es la primera vez que toco desde que murió mi pobre esposa.

Pero el mayor no le oyó; se limitó a darle la mano con un gesto algo rígido. Anduvo con Kuhlenbeck por callejas estrechas y por la plaza del Mercado; una fina lluvia de otoño les caía encima oblicuamente; los dos llevaban el capote gris de uniforme, los dos llevaban gorras de uniforme y, sin embargo, no eran camaradas en el uniforme imperial. Cosa que el mayor constató.

LXXVII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 14

El conocimiento adquirido mediante el ayuno y la mortificación carece ciertamente del último rigor lógico. Creo poder afirmar con toda seguridad que en aquella época se produjo un cambio en mi situación cognoscitiva. Pero yo observaba esta transformación con la más extrema desconfianza, porque coincidía precisamente con la prolongada deficiencia alimentaria. En efecto, casi estaba dispuesto a presentarme ante el doctor Litwak y a considerarme enfermo, sobre todo porque podía hablarse más de una sensación de aumento de mi lucidez corporal que de un agudizamiento de mi capacidad de conocimiento del universo. Si, por ejemplo, me planteaba la vieja cuestión de si mi vida poseía aún una realidad sensible o no, era aquella sensación corporal la que me daba la respuesta y me proporcionaba la certeza de estar viviendo en una especie de realidad de segundo orden, advirtiéndome que se había producido una especie de realidad irreal, una irrealidad real que me llenaba de una extraña alegría. Era como una especie de estado oscilante entre el no-saber-todavía y el saber-ya, era un símbolo que volvía a simbolizarse, un andar sonámbulo que conducía a la claridad, una angustia que se abolía y se renovaba partiendo de ella misma era como una oscilación pendular sobre el mar de la muerte, como un alado ir y venir por encima de las olas, sin rozarlas porque me había vuelto ingrávido. Era una percepción casi corporal, por la cual me hacía cargo de la superior realidad platónica del mundo, y en mí todo era completa seguridad de que me bastaría dar un solo y breve paso para transformar esta percepción corporal en percepción racional.

En esta realidad oscilante, las cosas fluían hacia mí, y no tenía que preocuparme de ellas. Lo que antes parecía pasividad tenía ahora un sentido. Si antes me quedaba en casa para seguir aferrado a mis pensamientos, sostener monólogos filosóficos y, de vez en cuando, anotarlos de manera esquemática, ahora me quedo en mi cuarto como un enfermo obediente ante las exigencias de su enfermedad y de su médico. Todo ha sucedido como deseaba el doctor Litwak. Ahora me visita regularmente e incluso, a veces, soy yo quien le llama para que venga a verme. Y cuando, cambiando de repente su punto de vista, quiere hacerme creer que no estoy enfermo: «Una chispita de anemia es lo que tiene usted; por lo demás, está *meschugge,* está loco», también entonces tiene razón, pues me siento como si me desangrara. No quiero pensar más, y no porque sea incluso incapaz de hacerlo, sino porque es algo que desprecio. Cierto que todavía no soy un sabio, que no creo en absoluto haber alcanzado el último peldaño del saber ni creo poder situarme por encima del saber. ¡Ay, lo que estoy es muy por debajo del saber y lo que tras ese desprecio por la palabra se oculta es el temor a perder lo oscilante! ¿O será acaso que, de repente, he adquirido la convicción de que la unidad entre pensar y ser solo puede alcanzarse en el más humilde de los marcos? ¡Ser y pensar reducidos al mínimo!

Marie viene a veces a verme, me trae algunas provisiones, como hace con sus otros enfermos, y yo lo acepto. Hace poco se encontró en casa con Litwak y con Nuchem. Como es costumbre en ella, les saludó amablemente con un «Dios les bendiga», y tampoco Litwak renunció en aquella ocasión a su respuesta habitual «hasta la centésima generación». Marie tosió y él puso cara de preocupación:

—Eso no está bien —dijo, sin que pudiera saberse si se refería a la posible enfermedad pulmonar o al peligro de contagio a que veía expuesto a Nuchem; se ofreció a visitar gratis a Marie y, al declinar esta su ofrecimiento, dijo—: Al menos, pasee usted al aire libre… y lléveselo a él también. Está anémico.

No lejos de ellos, Nuchem hojeaba de pie mis libros. Por lo demás, Litwak siempre me recetaba medicamentos nuevos y, cuando me extendía la receta, decía siempre, riendo:

—Desde luego, no los tomará, pero un médico ha de recetar.

Habíamos llegado a una especie de común acuerdo.

¿Dónde radicaba el punto central de nuestra mutua comprensión? ¿Por qué tenía yo que permanecer entre ellos? ¿Por qué la provisionalidad de vivir entre judíos se había convertido para mí en algo duradero y era incapaz de imaginarme siquiera el abandonarlos? ¿Por qué obedecía yo a estos judíos? Todo era provisional, los refugiados eran provisionales, sí, toda su existencia lo era, e incluso el tiempo mismo era provisional, tan provisional como la guerra que se prolongaba más allá de su propio final. Lo provisional se había convertido en definitivo, aboliéndose a sí mismo sin cesar y, no obstante, subsistiendo. Nos persigue siempre y a ello nos acomodamos, en una vivienda judía, en un hospicio. Pero nos eleva por encima de lo que ha sido, nos mantiene en un feliz estado de flotación, casi eufórico, en el que todo es futuro.

Finalmente, obedeciendo al doctor Litwak, iba a pasear, siempre y cuando me acompañaran Nuchem o Marie.

Era un otoño de hermosos días, y yo me sentaba con Marie bajo los árboles. Y, como todo sucedía en medio de una transparente sinceridad y las palabras carecían de importancia, le pregunté:

—¿Eres una muchacha caída?

—Lo fui —respondió.

—¿Y ahora eres casta?

—Sí.

—¿Sabes que jamás salvarás a Nuchem?

—Lo sé.

—Entonces, ¿le amas?

Sonrió.

¡Espejo de sí mismo, símbolo de sí mismo! ¿Hasta qué extremos nos llevará la parábola infinitamente prolongada si no es a la muerte?

—Escucha, Marie. Quiero matarme, pegarme un tiro o arrojarme al canal Landwehr… Pero tienes que acompañarme, yo solo no seré capaz.

Mis palabras sonaban a broma, pero hablaba en serio. Sin duda ella lo notó, porque no se rió sino que, con cierto aire profesional, me contestó:

—No lo haré y usted tampoco. No tiene derecho a matarse.

—Pero tú sabes que tu amor por Nuchem es un amor sin esperanza.

No sacó ninguna conclusión; se limitó a mirarme fija e interrogativamente, buscando con afán la posibilidad de llegar a un entendimiento. Sus ojos habían perdido el color.

No era noble el juego que yo jugaba con ella y, no obstante, incluso entre nosotros hacía tiempo que existía un pleno entendimiento, porque ella dijo:

—Vivimos en la alegría.

—Nuchem no se matará, no puede; él no se aparta de su deber, nosotros en cambio vivimos en la alegría… Tenemos derecho a hacerlo.

Tal vez el que Nuchem estuviera al margen de cualquier clase de suicidio sirvió para tranquilizarla, porque volvió a sonreír e incluso cruzó las piernas, y su rostro dejó traslucir, como el de una dama, que estaba de vuelta de todo:

—Tampoco nosotros nos apartamos de nuestro deber.

Yo no podía tomar a mal aquella frase del Ejército de Salvación, tal vez porque dentro de lo provisional todas las frases habían perdido su sentido, tal vez porque, de antemano, la frase había adquirido un sentido nuevo y exacto. Pudiera suceder que también las palabras flotaran entre el pasado y el futuro, que también ellas floten entre las leyes y la alegría, que, huyendo del desprecio, se hayan refugiado en un nuevo sentido dentro del movimiento universal.

Sin embargo, yo no quería saber nada del deber, puesto que me habría retrotraído al conocimiento: yo no quería oír una sola palabra a propósito del deber, quería conservar mi propio estado flotante, y pregunté:

—¿Eres feliz a pesar de tu desgraciado amor?

—Sí —dijo ella.

La patria está irremediablemente perdida, el futuro yace irrecuperable ante nosotros, solo el dolor está cada vez más libre, es cada vez más claro, quizá incluso más invisible, nada queda sino el hálito doloroso del pasado. Y Marie dijo:

—Grande es el mal del mundo, pero mayor es su alegría —dijo Marie.

—¡Ay, Marie!, tú sabes lo que es sentirse extraña y, sin embargo, eres feliz, y sabes que solo la muerte, solo ese último instante abolirá tu sentimiento de extrañeza y, no obstante, quieres vivir.

—Aquel que vive en Cristo nunca está solo… Venga usted a nuestra casa.

—No —repliqué—, mi sitio está en mi vivienda judía. Iré a casa de Nuchem.

Pero esto ya no le hizo ningún efecto.

LXXVIII

Un hombre con los brazos amputados es un torso. Esta era la concatenación de ideas que solía usar Hanna Wendling cuando se esforzaba en pasar de lo general a lo individual y concreto. Y no era Heinrich quien se hallaba al final de dicha concatenación sino Jaretzki, un tanto tambaleante y con la manga vacía metida en el bolsillo de su uniforme. Pasó mucho tiempo hasta que reconoció con claridad esta imagen, y aún pasó más hasta que comprendió que dicha imagen, producto de su mente, podía corresponder, estuviera donde estuviese, a una realidad. Y a continuación transcurrió no poco tiempo hasta que se decidió a llamar al doctor Kessel.

Proceso tan lento no estaba basado en la especial moralidad del pensamiento de Hanna. No, sucedía simplemente que, en una desaceleración de su corriente vital, había perdido todo sentido del tiempo y del ritmo; cierto que no se trataba de un estancamiento, sino más bien de una evaporación, una volatilización hacia la nada, un deslizamiento sobre un suelo por completo poroso, la desaparición y el olvido de lo pensado poco antes. Y cuando el doctor Kessel, tal como habían acordado al citarse, la recogió con su cabriolé para ir a la ciudad, ella tuvo la sensación de haber hecho venir al médico, empujada por una aprensión particular e informulable respecto a su hijo, y le costó mucho poner en marcha la memoria. Después, es cierto, presa de un miedo repentino a empezar a olvidar, le preguntó enseguida —aún estaban cruzando el jardín— quién era aquel teniente manco del hospital militar. El doctor Kessel no cayó de inmediato en la cuenta, pero, cuando la hubo ayudado a subir al carruaje y, con respiración un tanto fatigosa, se hubo sentado junto a ella, se le ocurrió:

—Ya sé, usted se refiere a Jaretzki, naturalmente… Pobre muchacho, ahora debe de estar en alguna institución psiquiátrica.

Con estas palabras concluyó para Hanna la vivencia de Jaretzki. Efectuó sus compras en la ciudad, envió un paquete a Heinrich y visitó a Röders. También hizo que Walter fuera a casa de Röders. Quería regresar a casa a pie. Las inexplicables preocupaciones en torno a Walter habían desaparecido de pronto. Era una dulce y tranquila tarde otoñal.

No hubiera sido nada raro que aquella noche Hanna soñara con un torso griego hundido en el limo de un río, o con un bloque de mármol o, incluso —y hubiera sido suficiente—, con un gran guijarro bañado por las aguas. Pero como no soñó nada de todo eso, sería inconveniente y poco objetivo decir lo que fuera sobre este tema. Lo seguro es que pasó una noche muy intranquila, que se despertó muchas veces, y que estuvo escudriñando la abierta ventana, en espera de que se abrieran las persianas y apareciera el rostro enmascarado de un ladrón. Por la mañana pensó en despejar el cuarto de servicio contiguo a la cocina, a fin de que en él se instalaran el jardinero y su mujer para, llegado el caso, tener en la casa un hombre a quien pedir ayuda, pero desechó de inmediato el plan, porque el pequeño y débil jardinero no ofrecía en realidad protección ninguna, y solo le quedó un resto de pronunciada animosidad contra Heinrich, por haber situado la vivienda del jardinero tan lejos de la casa; tampoco se había preocupado de poner rejas en las ventanas. Pero, ante sí misma, tenía que reconocer que todo el malestar que sentía apenas si tenía nada que ver con el auténtico miedo: más que miedo, en realidad era una especie de hipersensibilidad relacionada con lo solitario y aislado de la casa, aunque con toda seguridad Hanna habría rechazado y hasta evitado la proximidad de casas habitadas, y con el espacio vacío que rodeaba la finca, tan vacío como un paisaje extinto y reconstituido a trozos, tan muerto que se había convertido en una especie de cinturón de vacío. Era un cinturón que se ceñía cada vez más estrechamente en torno a la casa solitaria, cinturón que solo podía hacer saltar un nuevo acto de violencia, un despedazamiento, una ruptura, una invasión. Hacía poco que había leído en el periódico algo sobre la revolución rusa y los sóviets, bajo el título La *invasión de los de abajo*; este título le vino a la mente durante la noche, y lo oía una y otra vez en su interior como una tonada popular. En cualquier caso, no estaría de más preguntarle a Kruhl, el herrero, cuánto costarían las rejas de las ventanas.

Las noches iban siendo cada vez más largas y la luna fría flotaba en el cielo como un gran guijarro. Pese al sensible descenso de la temperatura, Hanna no se veía con ánimo de cerrar las ventanas. El ruido que, con las ventanas cerradas, podían producir los cristales le parecía más horripilante aún que un silencioso ladrón y, así, tan particular tensión, que, sin ser miedo en realidad, podía en cualquier momento traspasar sus propios límites y estallar en pánico, le hacía adoptar actitudes en apariencia románticas. Así pues, todas las noches se apoyaba en el alféizar de la ventana y, extrañamente cautiva, casi absorbida por el vacío del paisaje, miraba a lo lejos, hacia la zona muerta del otoño, y el miedo, por no haberse despojado precisamente de todos los atributos del miedo, se convertía en una espuma ligera: el corazón era ligero como una flor y la petrificación de la soledad se desplegaba en la amplia y libre abertura de la respiración. Y todo esto casi era como una gozosa infidelidad respecto a Heinrich; era el estado que a ella le parecía estrictamente contrario a otro distinto y ya lejano… Sí, ¿cuál era aquel estado? Y entonces se dio cuenta de que era el estado contrario a aquel que ella había llamado antaño «acontecimiento físico». Y lo bueno era que, en aquellos momentos, el acontecimiento físico quedaba del todo olvidado.

LXXIX

Los temores de Esch se harían realidad: por culpa de Huguenau, al mayor le sobrevendrían nuevos sinsabores. De todos modos, al principio Huguenau solo desempeñó un papel pasivo.

A principios de octubre, una de aquellas listas por medio de las cuales el alto mando solía iniciar la búsqueda de sospechosos de deserción o de militares desaparecidos de sus puestos, fue a parar sobre la mesa del mayor. Entre los nombres citados figuraba el de un tal Wilhelm Huguenau, de Colmar, soldado del regimiento n.° 14 de infantería.

El mayor ya había dejado a un lado la lista cuando, de pronto, algo le inquietó. Volvió a coger la lista y sosteniéndola con el brazo lo más extendido posible, para alejarla de su vista cansada, se colocó de cara a la luz y leyó de nuevo: «Wilhelm Huguenau», nombre que desde luego ya tenía oído. Miró interrogativamente al ordenanza, que estaba a su disposición mientras se despachaba el correo, vio cómo el hombre, esperando evidentemente una orden, se cuadraba una vez más, y aún tuvo fuerzas para ordenarle «puede retirarse», pero, así que se queda solo, se derrumba sobre la mesa con el rostro hundido entre las manos.

Medio inconsciente, se sobresalta al pensar que el ordenanza sigue aguardando ante la puerta y que el ordenanza es Esch en persona. De momento, ni a mirar se atreve, pero, cuando al fin comprueba que no hay nadie, dice dirigiéndose al despacho vacío: «¡Qué más da…!», como si con ello pudiera zanjar el caso. De todos modos no sirve de nada: la imagen de Esch sigue ante la puerta y le mira; Esch le mira como si hubiera descubierto en él un estigma. Es una mirada de reproche, de castigo, la que clava en él, y el mayor se avergüenza de haber mirado a Huguenau mientras este bailaba. Pero este pensamiento se desvanece y, de pronto, oye la voz de Esch: «Siempre hay un traidor entre nosotros».

«Siempre hay un traidor entre nosotros», repite el mayor. Un traidor es un hombre indigno, un traidor es un hombre que traiciona a su patria, un traidor es un hombre que ha engañado a su patria y a sus camaradas… un desertor es un traidor. Y mientras por este camino va acercándose más y más al objeto oculto, de pronto el velo se desgarra y, al fin, lo comprende todo, absolutamente todo: él ha sido el traidor, él, el comandante de la plaza, él, que recurrió a un desertor y le vio bailar; ha sido él quien llamó al desertor para que el desertor le invitara a visitar la redacción del periódico, para que el desertor le preparara el camino hacia la vida civil, le presentara amigos que no son camaradas… El mayor se lleva la mano a la Cruz de Hierro y rompe la cinta: un traidor no tiene derecho a llevar semejante distintivo honorífico, un traidor tiene que rechazar esta condecoración, no puede ser enterrado con esta condecoración… El deshonor solo puede borrarse con una bala de pistola… Es preciso asumir el castigo… Y el mayor, petrificado, inmóvil, con la mirada como el hielo, dice:

—Un final impropio de un caballero.

Todavía tenía la mano sobre los botones del uniforme, cerciorándose maquinalmente de que estaban todos abrochados, y este gesto le proporcionó una especie de extraña sensación de tranquilidad, como la esperanza de una vuelta al deber, una vuelta a una vida en verdad protectora, aunque la imagen de Esch no hubiera desaparecido todavía. Imagen luminosa e inquietante, imagen que se hallaba al mismo tiempo en el otro y en este mundo, imagen que representaba a la vez el Bien y el Mal, llena de seguridad, y no obstante, llena de aquella inseguridad que se desprende de la vida civil, la imagen de un hombre que abriéndose el chaleco luce su camisa. Y el mayor, con la mano todavía en los botones del uniforme, se yergue, se estira la guerrera, se pasa la mano por la frente y dice:

—Fantasmas del cerebro.

Le gustaría llamar a Esch, él podría aclararlo todo… Le gustaría hacerlo, pero significaría apartarse una vez más del camino del deber, escapar una vez más hacia el mundo civil. Y no podía ser. Además… uno ha de reflexionar a solas: toda su sospecha podría carecer de fundamento… y, pensándolo bien, el tal Huguenau siempre se había portado con corrección y patriotismo… Al final tal vez todo se aclararía por sí mismo y concluiría bien.

Con manos aún temblorosas, el mayor sostuvo de nuevo la lista ante sus ojos, la apartó luego a un lado y volvió a ocuparse del resto de la correspondencia. No obstante, por mucho que se esforzara en ponen orden en sus pensamientos, sus esfuerzos chocaban contra las órdenes contradictorias y las disposiciones del servicio, y se veía incapaz de resolver dichas contradicciones. El caos del mundo avanzaba por doquier, avanzaban el caos de las ideas y el caos del mundo, la oscuridad aumentaba y la oscuridad retumbaba en una agonía infernal, en cuyo chisporroteo solo una cosa se percibía con claridad, solo una cosa era segura: la derrota de la patria… ¡Oh, sí!, la oscuridad aumentaba, el caos crecía, pero desde el caótico estercolero de los gases vesicantes Huguenau sonreía con cínica mueca, la mueca del traidor, instrumento del castigo divino, causante de la creciente desgracia.

Durante dos días, el mayor llevó sobre sí el peso angustioso de una indecisión de la que, dada la angustiosa premura de los sucesos externos, ni él mismo era consciente. Ante el desorden general hubiera sido posible dejar olvidado, de forma natural, el insignificante asunto de deserción, pero, para el

comandante de la plaza, también era natural que salida tan simple ni siquiera cupiese en el terreno de lo imaginable. Porque el imperativo categórico del deber no tolera la acumulación de irregularidades. Y, al segundo día, el mayor ordenó que se invitara a Huguenau a pasarse por la comandancia.

Cuando tuvo al traidor ante sí, la reprimida antipatía del mayor rebrotó con nuevo ímpetu. Respondió al cordial saludo con frío formulismo y, tendiendo la lista por encima de la mesa, señaló, sin pronunciar una sola palabra, la rúbrica «Wilhelm Huguenau», subrayada en rojo. Huguenau comprendió al punto que tenía que jugárselo todo a una carta y, ante tan amenazador peligro, halló de nuevo aquella lúcida seguridad que hasta entonces siempre le había servido de protección. Y aunque empleó un tono suave, la dureza de su mirada tras los rutilantes cristales de las gafas dio a entender al mayor que tenía ante él a un hombre que sabía perfectamente cómo defender su pellejo:

—Hace mucho tiempo que esperaba algo parecido, mi respetado comandante. El desorden de la administración militar, permítame decirlo, es cada día mayor… Sí, ya puede mi comandante mover la cabeza, pero es así: por desgracia, yo soy un ejemplo viviente… Cuando me di de baja en el Servicio de Dirección de Prensa, el suboficial que estaba de guardia se quedó con mis papeles, pretextando que tenía que comunicarlo al regimiento. Ya entonces temí que aquello me acarrease desagradables consecuencias, porque no es lo correcto enviar a un soldado de servicio sin documentación —en eso me dará mi comandante la razón—, pero me tranquilizaron asegurándome que más adelante me enviarían mis documentos. En mano solo me dieron el billete militar para Tréveris, ¿comprende, mi comandante? ¡No llevaba encima más que el billete militar y, para todo lo demás, arréglatelas como puedas! Pues bien, el billete militar tuve que entregarlo, según mandan las ordenanzas, a los mandos de la estación… Esta es la historia. Naturalmente, yo mismo me he reprochado muchas veces haber descuidado este asunto durante tanto tiempo, pero, mi comandante sabe mejor que nadie lo ocupado que estoy; y, si la administración falla, no hay que echarle la culpa al simple contribuyente y al defensor de la patria. Es de suponer. Pero ¡en lugar de apechugar con la verdad, resulta mucho más cómodo acusar de desertor a un hombre honrado! Mi comandante, si mi deber de patriota no me lo impidiera, ¡por mi gusto yo publicaría en la prensa este caso inaudito!

Todo aquello parecía posible; el mayor volvió a sentirse seguro.

—Si mi Comandante me permite hacerle una proposición, yo le rogaría que procurase comunicar a la policía militar y al regimiento que yo dirijo el periódico oficioso local y que, en honor a la verdad, me haré enviar cuanto antes los documentos de que carezco, cosa de la que voy a ocuparme de inmediato.

El malhumor del mayor se aferró a la expresión «en honor a la verdad». ¡Vaya lenguaje se atrevía a usar aquel hombre!

—No es usted quien ha de decirme cómo debo redactar mis comunicados. Y, además, en honor a la verdad, no le creo a usted.

—¡Ah! ¿De verdad? ¿Mi comandante no me cree? ¿Tal vez mi comandante ha averiguado ya en qué denuncia digna de crédito se apoya esta notificación? Porque es a todas luces evidente que se trata de una denuncia… y añado que es una denuncia ridícula y malintencionada…

Miró al mayor con aire triunfal: este, cogido de sorpresa por el nuevo ataque, ni tan siquiera atinó a pensar que, para tal comunicación, no hacía falta ninguna denuncia. Y Huguenau, creyéndose ya dueño de la situación, añadió:

—¿Cuántas personas saben que hay irregularidades en mis documentos? Yo solo conozco a una y esa única persona, hablando aparentemente en broma o utilizando símbolos, como a él le gusta llamarlos, me ha atacado con frecuencia llamándome traidor en más de una ocasión; acuérdese, mi comandante… Conozco yo muy bien ese tipo de bromas en apariencia tan santas… Locura religiosa la llaman ustedes, pero a mí y a otros como yo pueden costarnos dinero si no llegan a costarnos la vida…

Inesperadamente, el mayor, dando incluso un golpe sobre la mesa con el abrecartas, le atajó:

—¿Quiere usted tener la amabilidad de dejar al margen de esto al señor redactor Esch? Es un hombre honrado.

Tal vez fue poco inteligente por parte de Huguenau no controlarse y procurar salirse por la tangente; su castillo de naipes amenazaba con derrumbarse en cualquier momento. Lo sabía perfectamente, pero en su interior algo le decía *va banque* y no pudo evitar decir:

—Con todos mis respetos, me permito recordarle a mi comandante que ha sido usted y no yo el primero en mencionar el nombre de Esch. Por tanto, no me he equivocado al pensar que él es el intachable denunciante. ¡Ah!, si el viento sopla de ese lado y mi comandante, habida cuenta la amistad que le une a Esch, quiere favorecer los asuntos que este se lleva entre manos, entonces y con todo respeto solicito mi detención.

Había dado en el clavo. El mayor alzó un dedo en dirección a Huguenau y balbuceó con dificultad:

—Lárguese, lárguese… Le permito que se marche.

—Está bien, mi comandante, está bien… como usted quiera. Pero yo sé qué debo pensar de un oficial prusiano que recurre a tan mezquinos medios para desembarazarse de un testigo de sus derrotistas

discursos en reuniones comunistas. Bien está inclinarse según sople el viento, pero a mí no me apetece en absoluto hacer de parabrisas… ¡Salud!

Estas últimas palabras, absurdas en realidad, y dichas por Huguenau a modo de remate final de su retórica, ya no fueron oídas por el mayor. Apenas sin voz, musitó de nuevo:

—Lárguese… que el traidor se largue… tiene que largarse…

Entretanto, Huguenau ya había abandonado el despacho y cerrado la puerta tras de sí.

¡Aquello era el final, el final impropio de caballeros! ¡Estigmatizado, estigmatizado para siempre! ¿Había alguna salida? No, no había escapatoria… El mayor sacó su pistola del cajón del escritorio y la puso ante sí. Luego cogió papel de cartas y también lo colocó ante sí: tenía que servir para solicitar la dimisión. Lo mejor sería solicitar una infamante degradación. Pero todo tenía que hacerse siguiendo el curso regular y oficial. Él no abandonaría su puesto sin haber cumplido antes entregándolo conforme a las ordenanzas.

Aunque el mayor creía cumplir todos estos actos con la exactitud y la rapidez de un soldado, todo sucedía en realidad muy despacio y cualquier movimiento exigía un gran esfuerzo. Y con un supremo esfuerzo comenzó a escribir con pulso firme. Tal vez debido precisamente a lo desmesurado de este esfuerzo, no pasó de las primeras palabras: «Dirigida a…», había escrito en el papel con una letra que a él mismo le resultaba extraña, y ahí se quedó… La pluma se había roto, había rasgado el papel y había hecho una mancha muy fea. Y sosteniendo con fuerza la pluma, apretándola de forma convulsa, el mayor, que ya no era el mayor sino un hombre viejo, fue derrumbándose lentamente. Intentó de nuevo mojar la rota pluma, pero tiró el tintero y la tinta formó un delgado arroyuelo sobre la mesa y goteó sobre el pantalón. El mayor ya no se daba cuenta. Sentado, con las manos manchadas de tinta, miraba fijo hacia la puerta por la que había salido Huguenau. Pero, cuando al cabo de un rato la puerta se abrió y apareció en ella el ordenanza, todavía tuvo ánimos para levantarse y extender el brazo con gesto autoritario:

—Lárguese —ordenó al un tanto perplejo ordenanza—, lárguese… Me quedo de servicio.

LXXX

Jaretzki emprendió el viaje con el capitán Von Schnaack. Desde detrás de la verja, las enfermeras saludaron con la mano al coche que los conducía a la estación. Cuando volvieron a entrar en el edificio, la enfermera Mathilde tenía el anguloso aspecto de una solterona. Flurschütz dijo:

—En realidad ayer noche fue usted sumamente amable portándose con él como se portó… El muchacho estaba que daba asco… ¿De dónde sacó el licor polaco?

—Es muy desgraciado —dijo la enfermera Mathilde—. ¿Ha leído usted *Las almas muertas*?

—Deje que recuerde… creo que sí…

—Gogol —dijo la enfermera Carla, muy orgullosa de su cultura, que le brindaba siempre la respuesta oportuna—, siervos rusos de la gleba…

—Una de esas almas muertas, ese es Jaretzki —dijo Flurschütz. Y, al cabo de un rato, señalando a los grupos de soldados que había por el jardín, añadió—: … Todos ellos son almas muertas… Probablemente nosotros también lo somos; de algún modo, todos nosotros padecemos el mismo mal.

—¿Podría prestarme ese libro? —preguntó la enfermera Mathilde.

—No lo tengo aquí… Pero en alguna parte lo encontrará usted… Por lo demás, los libros… Ya sabe que ahora no puedo leer…

Se había sentado en el banco junto a la entrada, miraba hacia la calle y hacia las montañas, hacia aquel claro cielo de otoño algo más oscuro por el norte. La enfermera Mathilde dudó un poco, y también ella se sentó.

—¿Sabe usted señorita Mathilde?, en realidad habría que encontrar un medio de comunicación que no fuera el lenguaje… Todo lo que pueda decirse y escribirse se ha vuelto absolutamente sordo y mudo… Tendría que existir algo nuevo, de lo contrario nuestro médico jefe acabará por tener razón con su cirugía…

—No acabo de comprender —dijo la enfermera Mathilde.

—¡Ah, no se esfuerce, es una idiotez…! Quería decir simplemente que, si las almas están muertas, solo queda el bisturí… pero es un disparate.

La enfermera Mathilde reflexionó:

—¿No dijo algo parecido el teniente Jaretzki cuando hubo que amputarle el brazo?

—Es posible, tenía la manía del radicalismo… Naturalmente no podía ser sino radical… como todo animal enjaulado…

A la enfermera Mathilde le chocó la palabra «animal»:

—Yo creo que él se esforzaba simplemente en olvidarlo todo… Una vez lo dio a entender, y lo de la bebida…

Flurschütz se había echado la gorra hacia atrás; notó la cicatriz de su frente y se la frotó con suavidad:

—A decir verdad, no me extrañaría que, a partir de ahora, entrásemos en un período en que los hombres se dedicaran únicamente a olvidar, solo a olvidar: dormir, comer, dormir, comer… Como hace aquí la gente: dormir, comer, jugar a cartas…

—Sería espantoso, ¡sin ideales en absoluto!

—Querida señorita Mathilde, lo que usted está viviendo aquí no es la guerra de verdad sino una versión de la guerra en miniatura… Hace cuatro años que no se mueve usted de aquí… Todo el mundo calla, cuando están heridos todos callan… Pero ninguno ha traído consigo sus ideales, créame.

La enfermera Mathilde se había puesto de pie. Ahora un ancho muro de nubes parecía amenazar el claro cielo.

—Me inscribiré de nuevo en un hospital de campaña en cuanto pueda —dijo Flurschütz.

—El teniente Jaretzki opinaba que la guerra no terminaría nunca.

—Sí, tal vez por eso precisamente quiero volver al frente.

—También yo debería inscribirme.

—No, bastante hace usted aquí.

La enfermera Mathilde observó el cielo:

—He de entrar las tumbonas.

—Sí, señorita Mathilde, hágalo.

LXXXI

Era sábado. En la imprenta, Huguenau pagaba los salarios.

La vida había seguido su curso habitual; ni por un momento se le había ocurrido a Huguenau pensar que tenía que huir, porque le buscaban y le perseguían por desertor. Se había limitado a quedarse sencillamente donde estaba. Y no solo porque se sintiera ya demasiado atado a su círculo de influencia, ni porque a toda conciencia de comerciante le sea demasiado difícil renunciar de pronto a una empresa en la que ha invertido una bonita suma de dinero, propia o ajena, sino porque le retenía la sensación de que todo se hallaba cerrado por todas partes, sensación que le impedía capitular, que le obligaba a reafirmar su realidad frente a los demás. Y aunque todo ello fuera un tanto nebuloso, a fin de cuentas una cosa resultaba no obstante evidente: que el mayor y Esch volverían a encontrarse y que se burlarían de él. Así pues, se quedó donde estaba y se limitó a llegar a un acuerdo con la señora Esch respecto al reembolso de las comidas no efectuadas, de forma que, sin perjuicios materiales, podía mantenerse con frecuencia apartado de las odiosas comidas.

Naturalmente él sabía que aquella situación no se había provocado para favorecer las acciones particulares contra un vulgar desertor alsaciano; se hallaba en una situación de relativa seguridad y, además, casi tenía al mayor a merced de un chantaje. Él lo sabía, pero no quería saberlo. Al contrario, imaginaba que la guerra podía cambiar de signo por un golpe de fortuna y que el mayor se convertía en un personaje importante que, en unión de Esch, solo esperaba el momento oportuno para hundirlo. Se trataba, pues, de combatir esos planes mientras fuera posible hacerlo. Tal vez fuera por simple superstición, pero no tenía derecho a cruzarse de brazos, necesitaba aprovechar el tiempo que le quedaba, todavía tenía negocios urgentísimos que arreglar, y, como hubiera sido incapaz de explicar a qué venía tanta urgencia, se tranquilizó pensando que, si él colocaba contraminas, sus enemigos tendrían que arreglárselas como pudieran.

Así pues, estaba pagando los salarios. Lindner miró el dinero, lo volvió a contar, miró de nuevo el dinero y, por último, lo dejó sobre la mesa. El ayudante de cajista, que estaba a su lado, tampoco dijo nada. Huguenau no comprendía:

—Bueno, Lindner, ¿por qué no lo coge? ¿Va a resultar al final que tiene usted algo contra el dinero?

Lindner dijo con evidente hostilidad:

—La tarifa sindical es de noventa y dos pfennigs.

Aquello era algo nuevo, pero Huguenau no perdió el control:

—Claro, en efecto, así es en las grandes empresas… Pero en una empresa de mala muerte como esta… Un trabajador viejo y experimentado como usted debería saber cómo van las cosas. Nos atacan por todas partes, todo son enemigos… Si yo no hubiera sacado a flote el periódico, hoy no habría ningún tipo de salario… ¡Y así me lo agradecen! ¿Cree usted que no me gustaría pagarle el doble? Pero ¿de dónde voy a sacarlo? Tal vez crea que nuestro periódico tiene alguna subvención del gobierno… En tal caso, sí tendría sentido ir al sindicato y exigir los salarios según las tarifas. Hasta yo me haría del sindicato. Las cosas me irían mucho mejor.

—Yo no soy del sindicato —refunfuñó Lindner.

—Entonces, ¿cómo sabe las tarifas sindicales?

—Esas cosas se saben enseguida.

Durante todo este rato, Huguenau había reflexionado. Naturalmente el culpable era Liebel con su propaganda sindical. ¡O sea que él también era un enemigo! Pero, en las actuales circunstancias, convenía tener buenas relaciones con Liebel:

—Bien, ya encontraremos una solución… Digamos que, a partir de noviembre, nuevas tarifas. Hasta entonces queda tiempo para hablar.

Los dos hombres se dieron por satisfechos.

Por la noche se dirigió al café Zur Pfalz a fin de encontrar a Liebel. De hecho, el incidente Lindner solo era un pretexto. Huguenau no estaba precisamente de mal humor, veía muy claro el asunto. Uno ha de saber dónde tiene a su enemigo; entonces, y si es preciso, puede uno cambiar el frente de operaciones. Pues bien, él sabía dónde estaba el enemigo. Ahora han cerrado el burdel y dos tabernas de las afueras… Pero cuando él se ofreció a combatir a los elementos subversivos, el mayor no lo aceptó. Ya está: el viejo ha de ser elogiado de nuevo en el periódico de mañana, esta vez por haber cerrado el burdel. Y Huguenau tarareó para sus adentros: «Señor Dios, Dios de los ejércitos».

En el café Zur Pfalz estaban Liebel, el doctor Pelzer, enrolado como voluntario, y otros hombres. Cuando llegó, Pelzer le preguntó:

—¿Y dónde se ha dejado usted a Esch? Hace tiempo que no se le ve.

Huguenau sonrió burlón:

—Meditación bíblica del santo *sabbath*… No tardará en hacerse circuncidar.

Estalló una carcajada general y Huguenau se sintió orgulloso. Pero Pelzer le dijo:

—No importa, de todos modos Esch es un gran tipo.

Liebel meneó la cabeza:

—Es increíble lo que pasa hoy en día…

—Precisamente en tiempos como estos —dijo Pelzer— es cuando la gente fabrica sus propias ideas… Yo soy socialista, y usted, Liebel, también… No obstante, Esch es un gran tipo… a mí me gusta.

La frente un tanto abultada de Liebel se tiñó de rojo y la vena que la cruzaba se hinchó:

—En mi opinión, todo eso solo sirve para aborregar el pueblo, y debería suprimirse.

—Exacto —dijo Huguenau—, son ideas destructivas.

Alguien de la mesa se rió:

—¡Vaya por Dios y cómo hablan ahora hasta los grandes capitalistas!

Los cristales de las gafas de Huguenau lanzaron un destello en dirección al que había hablado:

—Si yo fuera un gran capitalista no estaría aquí sentado sino en Colonia o tal vez en Berlín.

—Bueno, tampoco es usted precisamente un comunista, señor Huguenau —dijo Pelzer.

—En efecto, mi distinguido señor doctor, no lo soy… Pero sé lo que es justo y lo que no lo es… ¿Quién fue el primero en denunciar las irregularidades de la penitenciaría, eh?

—Nadie niega sus méritos —admitió Pelzer—. ¿De dónde hubiéramos sacado un Bismark de hierro tan bonito si no hubiera sido por usted?

Huguenau adoptó aires de persona respetable; dio un golpecito en el hombro de Pelzer:

—¡Las bromas con su tía, amigo mío!

Pero luego soltó el trapo: que si méritos por aquí, que si méritos por allá. Desde luego él siempre había sido un buen patriota, desde luego él había celebrado siempre las victorias de su país. ¡Que se atrevieran a censurarle por ello! Pero lo había hecho porque sabía que era el único medio de cantarle las cuarenta a la burguesía, que, ni que decir tiene, conserva su bolsa bien atada, y obligarla a hacer algo por los hijos de los pobres proletarios caídos en el frente. Si no recordaba mal, ¡era él quien lo había conseguido! ¿Y cómo se lo agradecían? ¡No le sorprendería que la policía tuviera en sus manos órdenes secretas contra él! Pero él no tenía miedo, podían venir, todavía tenía amigos que, llegado el caso, le sacarían de la cárcel. ¡Había que acabar con la jurisdicción secreta! Sin saber cómo, un hombre desaparece y luego se sabe que lo han encerrado en la cárcel. ¡Dios, cuántos habrá pudriéndose en los calabozos! No, no hay justicia, ¡solo tenemos una justicia policial! Y lo peor era el fariseísmo de los esbirros de la policía, siempre con la Biblia en la mano, pero siempre para darle con ella a alguien en la cabeza. Pero, eso sí, antes y después de la pitanza, hay que rezar una oración bendiciendo la mesa mientras los demás, con oración o sin ella, revientan de hambre…

Pelzer había escuchado con complacencia, pero, llegado a este punto, le interrumpió:

—Tengo la impresión, Huguenau, de que usted es un *agent provocateur*.

Huguenau se rascó la cabeza:

—¿Cree usted que no me han hecho proposiciones de ese tipo? Si yo le contara… ¡Bah!, dejémoslo… Siempre he sido un hombre correcto y seguiré siéndolo aunque me cueste el cuello… Lo único que no soporto es el fariseísmo.

—Realmente lo que están haciendo con la Biblia… —corroboró Liebel—. Alimentar al pueblo con citas bíblicas, eso es lo que les gusta a los amos.

Huguenau asintió con la cabeza:

—Exacto, primero citas bíblicas y luego fusilamientos… Hay mucha gente que el otro día oyó conmigo los fusilamientos en la prisión… Bueno, no quiero hablar. Pero antes que a una de esas reuniones prefiero irme al cine.

Así adoptaba Huguenau posiciones en la incipiente lucha entre los de arriba y los de abajo. Y aunque la propaganda bolchevique le fuera del todo indiferente, aunque él habría sido el primero en pedir protección si se tratara de sus propios bienes y aunque publicara con desagrado en *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* el número creciente de atracos, dijo ahora con auténtica convicción:

—Los rusos son unos tipos muy sensatos.

—Yo así lo creo —dijo Pelzer.

Cuando salían del local, Huguenau levantó un dedo amenazador contra Liebel:

—Conmigo también ha sido usted un fariseo… azuzar de ese modo al viejo Lindner, cuando yo solo trabajo para esas gentes… Usted lo sabe de sobra. En fin, ya lo aclararemos entre usted y yo.

LXXXII

Una niña de ocho años que tiene la intención de irse sola a correr mundo.

Camina por el estrecho sendero de hierba que queda entre las rodadas y ve los botones de trébol lila pálido por allí perdidos y marchitos; ve boñigas de vaca, resecas y blancuzcas por el tiempo, en cuyos bordes ha vuelto a crecer la hierba, y nota los espinos que se enganchan en las medias y pinchan. La niña ve muchas y diferentes cosas, ve los cólquicos en los prados, ve dos vacas de un gris amarillento paciendo en la ladera que desciende hacia el valle y, como no puede mirar el paisaje ininterrumpidamente, baja la vista hacia su vestido y contempla las primorosas rosas silvestres bordadas en el negro algodón: siempre hay una flor abierta junto a un capullo erguido sobre un tallo verde claro entre dos hojitas verdes, y en el centro de la rosa abierta hay un punto amarillo. A la niña le gustaría tener un sombrero negro en el que poder prender una rosa y un capullo con dos hojitas; quedaría muy bien. Pero tiene un impermeable con capucha.

Ahora bien, la niña, que camina a lo largo del río con una mano en la cadera y apretando muy fuerte en la otra una moneda de un marco para los gastos de viaje, conoce la región perfectamente. Camina a través del paisaje como un ama de casa por su vivienda y si, por la agradable sensación que le produce en el dedo gordo del pie, le da una patada a un guijarro, es como si pusiera orden. Todo en torno es claridad. La niña ve ahora los grupos de árboles que se elevan, recortados, en el aire límpido de la tarde otoñal, y el paisaje no tiene secretos para ella: tras el aire límpido se halla el claro cielo azul, entre las verdes copas se transparenta siempre, como si no pudiera ser de otro modo, un árbol de hojas amarillentas elevándose hacia el cielo y, de vez en cuando, aunque no sople viento, la brisa trae una hoja amarillenta que, meciéndose con suavidad, va a posarse sobre el camino.

Si la niña vuelve los ojos hacia la derecha, allí donde las praderas y los arbustos ribetean las márgenes del río, puede que vea los cantos rodados del lecho de la corriente y puede que vea también el agua, pues en otoño los arbustos están más secos y, no formando ya aquel verde muro impenetrable, dejan al descubierto las pardas ramas. Pero si la niña vuelve los ojos hacia la izquierda, ve la pradera pantanosa; ahí está, inquietante y maligna, y si uno pretende pisar su hierba, el agua se mete en los zapatos. No se debe atravesar una pradera pantanosa como esta, pues, ¿quién sabe?, tal vez uno podría ahogarse sin remisión en sus aguas pantanosas.

El sentimiento de la naturaleza es en los niños menor que en los adultos, pero en cambio es más intenso. Los niños no se detienen ante un bello panorama que les permita hacerse cargo de una región, pero, en cambio, un árbol erguido en una colina lejana puede atraerles tanto que su mayor deseo consista en cogerlo con la boca y correr hacia él para tocarlo. Y en lugar de contemplar la grandiosidad de un valle extendido a sus pies prefieren precipitarse en él, como si así pudieran también arrojar en él su propia inquietud; por eso los niños están siempre moviéndose, muchas veces sin ninguna utilidad, y bailan en la hierba, trepan a los árboles, intentan comerse el follaje y, por último, se refugian en la copa de un árbol o en la oscuridad protectora de un arbusto.

En consecuencia, mucho de lo que en general suele atribuirse al casi inagotable despliegue de energías infantiles y a su exuberante vitalidad, carente de sentido y de sentido llena, no es sino el desnudo miedo de la criatura que comienza a morir al reconocer su soledad; o sea que, en muchos aspectos, el corretear de los niños es la desorientación errante del comienzo del curso de la vida; su risa, acusada muchas veces por los adultos de inmotivada, es la risa del que se encuentra sorprendido y asaltado por la soledad; y por todo ello resulta comprensible que una criatura de ocho años decida correr mundo a fin de, con ese supremo y extraordinario esfuerzo, que podríamos calificar de heroico y definitivo, condensar su propia soledad para vencer en ella la gran soledad, lanzar el infinito contra la unidad, la unidad contra el infinito;

además de eso, muchas otras se hacen comprensibles y, en una empresa de este tipo, no son los motivos habituales ni su peso lo que importa, sino que se trata de otras motivaciones: una mariposa, por ejemplo —o sea, algo tan insignificante que no alteraría el equilibrio de una balanza—, puede influir en el curso de los acontecimientos. Sí, puede suceder así: supongamos que esta mariposa; tras haber revoloteado un rato ante la criatura, se aparta ahora de su camino y desaparece por encima de la pradera pantanosa; este hecho carecerá de importancia ante los ojos de los adultos, porque son incapaces de ver que no ha sido la mariposa sino su alma la que ha abandonado a la criatura. Y la niña se detiene, quita su mano de la cadera y, con un rápido movimiento, condenado de entrada al fracaso, intenta atrapar lo que hace ya rato se ha escapado.

Ahora la niña recorre otro trecho de su camino inicial. Llega casi hasta el gran puente de hierro que, procedente del este, conduce el paisaje hasta la ciudad, que le sale al encuentro. En este punto, el sendero de junto a la ribera, seguido hasta ahora por la niña, llevaría hacia arriba, hacia la cinta de la carretera, para volver a descender por el otro lado. Pero la niña no llega hasta allí. Porque frente a este puente tan conocido para ella, frente al gris enrejado de hierro, a través del cual el bosque de abetos se ve dividido en negros cuadros, visión que siempre le ha infundido mucho miedo, y frente a la familiaridad sorprendente de lo conocido, que parece decidido a no acabar nunca, la niña opta de pronto por salir del valle definitivamente. Dicho y hecho. Y si la niña tal vez había esperado al salir de casa que lo conocido y lo familiar fueran deslizándose poco a poco, sin dolor, por así decirlo, en el seno de lo que a ella le es ajeno, el dolor de la despedida queda amortiguado por el deseo de llegar al otro extremo de la pradera pantanosa, por donde ha desaparecido la mariposa.

La pendiente se eleva allí de forma moderada, pero lo suficientemente alta como para que la niña solo distinga el tejado de la casa que hay arriba y las copas de los árboles. Tal vez habría sido más sensato emprender la ascensión por la carretera. Pero la impaciencia de la niña es demasiado grande para hacerlo: bajo el cielo azul claro, ese cielo fresco-cálido de después del verano, bajo los rayos del sol que queman la espalda, la niña empieza a correr; corre en torno a la pradera pantanosa a fin de encontrar un paso a un sendero; quiere encontrar un sendero, por estrecho que sea, pero buscándolo ha rodeado la pradera y se halla al pie de la colina, como si la colina, camello que se arrodilla para que lo monten, le hubiera salido al encuentro. Esta doble prisa —la propia y la de la colina— encierra algo de inquietante, y de hecho la niña, al ir a poner el pie en la curva imperceptible merced a la cual la llana pradera comienza a ascender hacia lo alto, duda. Si ahora levanta la cabeza, la casa de labor de allá arriba desaparece por completo y solo se ven las copas de algunos árboles. No obstante, cuanto más trepa hacia arriba más crece a sus ojos la hacienda de lo alto; primero los árboles de intenso verdor, como si allí la primavera tirase de ellos; luego el tejado del que surge, erguido como una vela, un estandarte de humo y, finalmente, entre los troncos, aparecen los blancos muros de la casa. Es una casa de campo situada en el centro de un jardín muy verde, y la última pendiente, tan inclinada que la niña solo puede subirla a gatas, es también tan verde que la niña se limita a mover las manos hasta quedar tendida boca abajo, con el rostro entre la hierba, y arrastrar las rodillas con lentitud.

Ahora, cuando la niña está de verdad arriba y el perro de la finca comienza a tirar de la cadena, la esperada primavera ha desaparecido. Desde luego el paisaje resulta desconocido y extraño e, incluso el valle, hacia el que ahora lanza una mirada, no es ya el mismo valle del que acaba de salir. ¡Doble metamorfosis! Metamorfosis preñada de tristeza, mas, pese a ello, no decisiva, pues la metamorfosis solo puede basarse en la luz: con la rapidez propia del otoño, la límpida claridad de la luz se ha tornado lechosa, pero, al mismo tiempo, frente a la bóveda ahora blanquecina del cielo, surge otro cielo, porque el valle comienza a llenarse de blanca niebla. Todavía es la hora primera de la tarde, pero ya empieza la noche de lo desconocido. El camino a cuyo borde se halla la casa de campo se alarga hasta el infinito, y en el frío que aumenta por momentos mueren las mariposas. Pero la niña comprende de pronto —¡y esto sí es lo decisivo!— que no existe ninguna meta, que su andar de aquí para allá buscando una meta es algo por completo estéril, que a lo sumo el infinito puede ser una meta. La niña no piensa todo esto, se limita a contestar con sus actos la pregunta jamás formulada, se precipita en lo desconocido, huye hacia el camino, huye hacia el camino que se alarga infinito en sí mismo, pierde el control y en su agotadora carrera, semejante a una parada entre los inmóviles muros de la niebla, ni siquiera puede llorar. Y cuando, filtrándose entre la niebla, llega en realidad el anochecer, la luna se convierte en una mancha blanca sobre el muro de niebla, y cuando, tras un golpe insonoro, la niebla se esfuma y las estrellas forman un arco, cuando la inmovilidad del atardecer queda borrada por la fijeza de la noche, la niña llega a un pueblecito desconocido y tropieza en las piedras de las mudas callejas en las que, aquí y allá, se ve algún carruaje sin enganchar.

Apenas importa saber hasta dónde llegó Marguerite, si la trajeron de nuevo o si fue víctima de un vagabundo; el sonambulismo del infinito ha caído sobre ella y ya nunca más se verá libre de él.

LXXXIII

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 15

¡Oh, año nuevo, año otoñal de las callejas hambrientas!
¡Oh, dulces astros, que dan calor en las jornadas de otoño!
¡Oh, larga angustia! ¡Oh, largo día de las cosechas vacías!
¡Oh, despedida llena de angustia!, cuando sumisos y solos
se despidieron y en sus pupilas, por el dolor apenadas,
tan solo había un «saber-ya» y la renuncia sin llantos.
Se separaron
y en la ciudad donde los coches ululan
uno tras otro sus caminos se perdieron,
una tras otra hanse perdido sus huellas,
uno tras otro su corazón se ha perdido;
y nació la angustia:
el sol no brilla, la luna es como una piedra blancuzca
y, sin embargo, nada es temor, pues en el brillo de plata
de los ancianos cuya misión es el destino del alma,
en ese brillo, ¡la angustia se vuelve la ofrenda más santa!
¿Y no fue la angustia lo que les atrajo,
como junta el viento las hojas cansadas?
¿Y no fue la angustia de su amor un feudo
de la gran angustia del rojizo cielo
bajo cuya arcada hay coros de plata,
los coros que manan desde sus miradas?
Volando desciende tímida paloma,
el mar sobrevuela y olas de diluvio,
y trae la alianza a todas las almas:
Dios reina en la angustia y en el abandono del silencio reina,
en Él el amor angustia se vuelve y la angustia en voluntad de amor,
se vuelve alianza entre el tiempo y todos los tiempos a la tierra atados,
en pacto de soledad con todas las soledades…
Dios sumergió en el amor la gran angustia,
y en tu angustia, ¡oh, Dios!, tu ser se hace pensamiento.

LXXXIV

Las reuniones bíblicas se veían ahora muy poco frecuentadas. Los acontecimientos externos atraían las miradas, desviándolas de lo que sucedía en el interior de las almas, y esto era sobre todo aplicable a los forasteros, los cuales, así que olfatean la posibilidad de un pronto retorno a su hogar, prestan oídos a cualquier rumor. Los naturales del lugar eran más constantes; para estos las sesiones bíblicas habían pasado a formar parte del acostumbrado orden de cosas que deseaban conservar independientemente de que hubiera guerra o paz, mas, en el fondo, cada uno conservaba en su interior un rincón donde los rumores de paz, antes que alegrar, estorbaban.

Como naturales del lugar, Fendrich y Samwald eran de los más asiduos. Cierto que Huguenau afirmaba que Fendrich acudía tan solo porque la señora Esch siempre tenía leche en casa; a veces, incluso aseguraba que su desayuno era más reducido porque la señora Esch reservaba leche para aquellos beatos. Y no ocultaba su punto de vista. La señora Esch se reía:

—¿Quién debería entonces estar celoso, señor Huguenau?

Pero Huguenau tenía la respuesta siempre a punto:

—Lleve usted cuidado, mamá Esch, la beatería de su esposo acabará por sumirlos en la miseria.

Dicho sea de paso, las insinuaciones de Huguenau eran injustas: Fendrich hubiera acudido lo mismo sin café con leche.

De todos modos, ahora estaban los dos, Fendrich y Samwald, sentados de nuevo en la cocina. Huguenau, que se disponía a salir, asomó la nariz:

—¿Qué, comen a gusto los señores?

La señora Esch contestó en su lugar:

—¡Bah, si no tengo nada en casa!

Huguenau observó la boca de los dos hombres para ver si masticaban, observó también la mesa y, al no descubrir alimento de ningún tipo, quedó satisfecho.

—Bueno, en tal caso puedo dejarles a ustedes con toda tranquilidad. Está usted en buena compañía, mamá Esch.

No obstante se quedó; le hubiera gustado saber de qué hablaba la señora Esch con ellos. Pero, como

todos callaban, inició él la conversación:

—¿Y dónde está hoy su amigo, señor Samwald? El de los bastones.

Samwald señaló hacia la ventana, cuyos cristales temblaban debido al viento de otoño:

—Cuando hace mal tiempo, le duele todo… Lo nota de antemano.

—*Oh, la la*! —dijo Huguenau—, eso es reuma; es muy desagradable, en efecto.

Samwald denegó con la cabeza:

—No, él lo sabe… sabe cosas antes que nosotros…

Huguenau solo escuchaba a medias:

—También puede ser artritismo.

Fendrich se estremeció un poco:

—También yo lo noto, en todo el cuerpo… En la fábrica hay veinte o más con gripe… La hija del viejo Petri murió ayer… También ha muerto gente en el Hospital Militar. Esch dice que es la peste… peste pulmonar.

Huguenau se sintió asqueado.

—Ese debería tener cuidado con sus peroratas derrotistas… ¡Peste!, solo nos faltaba eso.

—A Gödicke ya no puede atacarle la peste —dijo Samwald—. Es un resucitado.

Fendrich sabía algo más sobre el tema:

—Según la Biblia, ahora se desatarán todas las plagas del Apocalipsis… El mayor también lo ha profetizado… Esch también lo dice.

—Mierda, ya estoy harto —dijo Huguenau—; que ustedes sigan con tan amena conversación. ¡Salud!

En la escalera se tropezó con Esch:

—Arriba tiene usted a dos estupendos compadres… Si a toda la ciudad le da por hablar de la peste, usted tendrá la culpa… Con su mojigatería vuelve usted loco a todo el mundo; eso es aborregar al pueblo.

Esch enseñó su dentadura de caballo e hizo un gesto despectivo con la mano, lo que puso furioso a Huguenau:

—Esa risita no viene a cuento, señor pastor.

Para su sorpresa, Esch volvió a ponerse serio inmediatamente:

—Es verdad, la situación no es para reírse… Pero la gente tiene razón.

Huguenau se sintió incómodo:

—¿Y en qué tiene razón la gente…? ¿Tal vez en lo de la peste?

—En efecto, y sería mucho mejor para usted, mi honrado amigo —dijo Esch con aire tranquilo—, que admitiera de una vez que nos hallamos sumidos en la angustia y bajo el azote de Dios.

—Me gustaría saber de qué iba a servirme —dijo Huguenau, continuando escaleras abajo.

Esch adoptó el tono de un maestro de escuela:

—Desde luego yo podría decírselo, pero usted no quiere saberlo… Tiene usted miedo de saberlo.

Huguenau se volvió. Esch se hallaba dos escalones más arriba y su aspecto era fuerte y poderoso; resultaba penoso tener que mirarle así, desde abajo, por lo que Huguenau subió de nuevo un peldaño. Sintió desconfianza. ¿Qué podía saber? Pero cuando Esch comenzó «Solo aquel que vive en la angustia participará de la Gracia…», Huguenau no le dejó continuar:

—¡Alto! Eso sí que no me hace falta oírlo…

Esch emitió de nuevo su sarcástica risita:

—¿Qué le decía yo? Eso no encaja con sus nuevas tendencias… por lo demás nunca ha encajado.

Y se dispuso a continuar su camino.

Los ojos de Huguenau brillaron tras los cristales de sus gafas:

—Un momento, señor Esch.

Esch se detuvo.

—Sí, señor Esch, he de decirle algo… Desde luego, todos esos desatinos no van conmigo… ríase usted o no, jamás han ido conmigo… Siempre he sido un hombre liberal y nunca lo he ocultado… Yo nunca me he metido en sus beaterías, de modo que tenga usted la amabilidad de dejar que me santifique a mi manera… Por mí puede usted llamarlo «nuevas tendencias», e incluso le autorizo a que husmee en mis asuntos, como evidentemente ya hace. Por lo demás, yo no soy, como usted, un tribuno del pueblo y, menos aún, un embrutecedor del pueblo; no tengo ambición, pero cuando oigo a la gente —naturalmente, no a esos beatos suyos de arriba—, me da la impresión de que las cosas van deslizándose por un cauce muy otro del que a usted le gustaría, señor pastor… Opino que no tardará en suceder algo y veo a algunas personas en la estacada… Si el mayor no hubiera preferido indisponerse conmigo, yo le advertiría, con todo respeto, del peligro; soy un buen muchacho… Claro que con usted no merece la pena seguir hablando, pero, con todo, dejo en su mano el avisar a tiempo a ese viejo loco y versátil. Como usted ve, conmigo se puede jugar con las cartas boca arriba; yo no ataco por la espalda, como hacen otros.

Y con estas palabras dio media vuelta definitivamente y continuó bajando la escalera con paso marcial y silbando. Enseguida se irritó consigo mismo por su benevolencia —no tenía motivo para sentirse

culpable ante los señores Pasenow y Esch—, ¿por qué y de qué tenía en realidad que avisarles?

Esch no se había movido. Sentía una especie de punzada en el corazón. Luego dijo para sí: «Aquel que se sacrifica es honrado». Y aunque de un tipo como aquel Huguenau pudieran esperarse toda clase de maldades, mientras siguiera con sus baladronadas todo iría bien: perro que ladra, no muerde. Y si despotrica en los cafés, aún será menos peligroso, y para el mayor menos que para nadie. Esch sonrió, afirmó bien los pies en el suelo y luego abrió sus brazos, estirándolos como quien acaba de despertarse o como un crucificado. Se sentía fuerte, firme y seguro y, como si fuera una operación en la que el mundo saldara sus cuentas sin error alguno, repitió: «Aquel que se sacrifica es honrado».

LXXXV

«Nadie ve a nadie en las tinieblas»
Sucesos de los días 3, 4 y 5 de noviembre de 1918

Lo que Huguenau había pronosticado se cumplió realmente: sucedió algo, y fue en los días 3 y 4 de noviembre.

El 2 de noviembre por la mañana, los trabajadores de la fábrica de papel realizaron una pequeña manifestación. Como suele suceder en tales casos, se concentraron frente al ayuntamiento, pero en esta ocasión, y en realidad sin motivo específico, apedrearon las ventanas. El mayor sacó a la media compañía de que aún disponía y los manifestantes se dispersaron. No obstante, la calma solo era aparente. Corrían rumores por toda la ciudad; se sabía que el frente se había hundido y, en cambio, nadie sabía nada de las negociaciones de alto el fuego. El aire estaba preñado de malos augurios.

Así transcurrió el día. Al atardecer, se vio por el oeste un gran resplandor rojizo y corrió la voz de que Tréveris ardía por sus cuatro costados. Huguenau, que ahora se arrepentía de no haber vendido tiempo atrás el periódico a los comunistas, quiso lanzar una edición especial, pero los trabajadores habían desaparecido. Por la noche hubo un tiroteo en las proximidades de la cárcel. Se dijo que era una señal para incitar a los detenidos a la rebelión. Más tarde y de modo oficial se dijo que uno de los centinelas de la cárcel, por culpa de un malentendido, había disparado varios tiros de alarma, pero nadie le creyó.

Frío, brumoso e invernal amaneció entretanto el día. A las siete, el consejo municipal se reunió en el salón de sesiones, mal iluminado, revestido de madera y sin calefacción. Todo el mundo pedía que se proveyera de armas a los ciudadanos burgueses. Para salir al paso a quienes objetaban que tal medida podría interpretarse como una provocación dirigida contra los trabajadores, se decidió establecer un cuerpo de seguridad constituido por burgueses y por trabajadores. Hubo dificultades con el comandante de la plaza relacionadas con el reparto de fusiles procedentes de los almacenes de reserva de armamento, pero, al final —pasando casi por encima de la cabeza del mayor—, se consiguieron las armas. Como es natural no había tiempo para proceder a un reclutamiento regular y se recurrió a elegir, entre todos, bajo la presidencia del alcalde, un comité que se encargara de la distribución de los fusiles. Antes del mediodía ya se habían entregado armas a todos aquellos que pudieron demostrar que residían en la ciudad y que conocían su manejo y, al llegar a este punto, el comandante de la plaza no pudo continuar negándose a que los militares colaboraran con el cuerpo de seguridad; la distribución de centinelas se hizo incluso desde la comandancia.

Naturalmente, Esch y Huguenau se habían presentado. Esch, pendiente sobre todo de permanecer cerca del mayor, solicitó prestar servicio en el interior de la población. Se le designó para el turno de noche, en tanto que Huguenau debería montar guardia en el puente a primera hora de la tarde.

Huguenau, sentado en el pretil de piedra del puente, bajo la niebla de noviembre, tenía frío. Junto a él estaba el fusil con la bayoneta calada. Por entre las piedras del pretil crecía la hierba y Huguenau se entretenía arrancándola. También podía arrancar de entre las piedras fragmentos antiquísimos de mortero y tirarlos al agua. Se aburría soberanamente y toda aquella situación le parecía absurda. El cuello del abrigo recién comprado, a pesar de estar subido y de lo mucho que le rozaba en el cuello y la barbilla, no le calentaba en absoluto. Por aburrimiento, hizo sus necesidades, pero también esto duró poco y volvió a sentarse. No tenía ningún sentido estar allí sentado, con aquel absurdo brazal verde en la manga y, además, con el frío que hacía. Pensó en darse una vuelta por el burdel, que estaba enfrente, ya que al mayor de nada le había servido cerrarlo; ahora se llamaba negocio clandestino.

Justo en el momento en que imaginaba a la vieja de la casa de citas encendiendo la calefacción y lo calentito que debería estarse allí dentro, apareció Marguerite.

—Vaya —dijo Huguenau—, ¿qué haces aquí…? Creí que te habías ido de viaje… ¿Qué has hecho con el marco que te di?

Marguerite no respondió.

Huguenau prefería ir al burdel:

—No puedes serme de ninguna utilidad… todavía no tienes catorce años… Anda, vete a tu casa.

Sin embargo, la sienta en sus rodillas; así se está más caliente. Al cabo de unos instantes, pregunta:

—¿Te has puesto los pantalones de franela?

Al contestar la niña afirmativamente, él se tranquilizó. Permanecieron sentados y muy juntos. A través de la niebla se oyó el reloj del ayuntamiento: las cinco, y qué oscuro ya.

—Los días son cortos —dijo Huguenau—, ha pasado otro año.

Un segundo reloj dio cuatro campanadas y luego cinco. Huguenau estaba más melancólico cada vez. ¿Y todo esto para qué? Allá, al otro lado de los campos, se encontraba la hacienda de Esch, y Huguenau escupió en aquella dirección trazando un gran arco. Pero entonces le entró miedo: había dejado abierta la puerta de la imprenta y, si hoy se cometían actos de pillaje, le destrozarían sus máquinas.

—Baja —le dijo a Marguerite de mal humor, y, como esta dudara, le dio un bofetón. Con ansia rebuscó en sus bolsillos la llave de la imprenta. ¿Debería ir él en persona, o sería mejor enviar a Marguerite con las llaves a casa de la señora Esch?

A punto estaba ya de abandonar su puesto y dirigirse a la casa, cuando algo le hizo temblar, presa de un miedo espantoso que la sacudía de la cabeza a los pies: allá en los linderos del bosque surgió un resplandor seguido de una horrible detonación. Aún tuvo tiempo de comprender que en la compañía de morteros algún idiota había hecho explotar un resto de municiones, pero así y todo ya se había echado instintivamente al suelo, y fue lo bastante precavido como para permanecer tendido en espera de otras posibles explosiones. En efecto, a los pocos instantes sonaron dos fuertes detonaciones más y después el ruido fue extinguiéndose en una sucesión de disparos aislados.

Huguenau observó con prudencia por encima del pretil de piedra, vio los arruinados muros de los almacenes de municiones, rojos por dentro y resplandecientes por fuera, ardiendo lentamente. «La cosa comienza», dijo para sí; se levantó y se sacudió el abrigo nuevo. Luego buscó con la mirada a Marguerite, le silbó varias veces, pero la niña había salido corriendo; confiaba en que se hubiera ido a casa. No le quedaba mucho tiempo para reflexionar, pues, procedentes del cuartel, se acercaban ya grupos de personas corriendo y llevando bastones e incluso fusiles. Y, para asombro de Huguenau, Marguerite corría con ellos.

Era evidente que iban camino de la penitenciaría. Lo comprendió al instante, y se sintió como un general de Estado Mayor cuyas órdenes se cumplen al segundo y al pie de la letra. En su interior una voz dijo «gente estupenda», y le pareció natural unirse a ellos.

A paso de carga y bramando llegaron a la penitenciaría. El portón estaba cerrado. Una lluvia de piedras cayó sobre él y luego procedieron a un ataque frontal. Huguenau fue el primero en asestar un culatazo a las tablas de madera. Alguien se había procurado una barra de hierro para hacer palanca, y no hubo que trabajar mucho; enseguida se abrió una brecha, la puerta saltó en pedazos y la masa se precipitó en el patio interior. No había nadie; el personal se había ocultado en alguna parte. Bueno, los cazarían en sus madrigueras a aquellos tipos… Pero de las celdas surgía un cántico salvaje y atronador: «¡Viva, viva, viva, tres veces viva!».

Cuando sonó la primera detonación, Esch se encontraba en la cocina. De un salto se plantó ante la ventana, pero, cuando a la segunda explosión la ventana se le vino encima con marco y todo y un gran estrépito, saltó hacia atrás. ¿Era un ataque aéreo? Su mujer, de rodillas entre los cristales rotos, farfullaba padrenuestros. Durante unos segundos, Esch se quedó mirándola con la boca abierta: ¡ella no había rezado en toda su vida! Después la levantó con violencia:

—¡Al sótano!, es la aviación.

Sin embargo, desde la escalera vio el incendio del almacén de municiones y oyó las detonaciones que venían de allí. O sea, que todo había empezado. Y su primer pensamiento fue «¡El mayor!». Empujar hacia el cuarto a su mujer que gimoteaba —al alejarse, todavía la oyó gemir que no la abandonara—, coger el fusil y precipitarse escaleras abajo fue obra de un instante.

La calle rebosaba de gente. Todo el mundo gritaba. Se oía un toque de corneta en la plaza del Mercado. Esch subió jadeante calle arriba. Tras él alguien llevaba al trote un par de caballos enganchados; sabía que eran para los bomberos y comprobar que aún se conservaba intacto un mínimo de orden le dio una sensación de bienestar. La manga de incendios había sido llevada a la plaza del Mercado, pero faltaban hombres. El corneta, subido en el pescante, repetía una y otra vez su llamada, pero de momento solo había seis hombres a punto. Por el otro extremo llegó a la plaza la compañía, y el capitán fue lo suficientemente sensato como para ponerla al servicio de los bomberos. Y partieron con la bomba que rechinaba

espantosamente.

En el ayuntamiento, todas las puertas estaban abiertas. No se veía a nadie; en la comandancia tampoco. Esch se tranquilizó; o sea que, al menos enseguida, no darían con el viejo. Pero ¿dónde estaba? Cuando salía, Esch se encontró al fin con un soldado que venía en dirección contraria. Esch le preguntó a gritos si había visto al mayor. Sí, lo último que había hecho fue dar la alarma al cuerpo de seguridad, y ahora debería de estar en el cuartel o en la penitenciaría… Al parecer, esta había sido atacada.

¡A la penitenciaría, pues! Esch partió, pesado y torpe, al galope.

Mientras la muchedumbre penetraba en el edificio de la penitenciaría, Huguenau se quedó en el patio. Sin lugar a dudas era un éxito, era un éxito, y Huguenau esbozó aquella mueca irónica suya que, esta vez, le salió a la perfección. El mayor no se extrañaría de verle allí, y no digamos Esch. No cabía duda, el éxito había sido rotundo; no obstante, Huguenau no se sentía del todo bien. ¿Qué pasaría luego? Contempló el patio; el cuartel en llamas producía un hermoso resplandor, pero en definitiva no era nada especialmente inaudito; nunca se había imaginado el patio de otro modo. Y estaba harto del brazal que llevaba.

¡De pronto estalló un gran griterío! Habían descubierto a un guardia y lo arrastraban hasta el patio. Cuando Huguenau se acercó, el hombre yacía en tierra como un crucificado; solo agitaba al aire con rítmicas convulsiones una pierna. Dos mujeres se habían lanzado sobre él, y el tipo de la palanca de hierro, con sus botas de clavos, le pisaba una mano mientras la palanca caía sobre los huesos del torturado. Huguenau notó que iba a devolver. Con el pánico en el estómago y en el corazón, echó a correr hacia la ciudad con el fusil al hombro.

La ciudad, bajo el reflejo de los cuarteles incendiados, aparecía muy iluminada, con sus fachadas terminadas en punta y los negros contornos de los edificios perfilándose bajo las torres del ayuntamiento y de la iglesia. De estas surgieron las campanadas de las cinco y media, despreocupadamente, como si la paz siguiera flotando por encima de aquella colonia humana. Y el sonido familiar de los relojes, la visión familiar de los edificios, la paz toda reinante pese a que todo ardía, hizo del miedo asfixiante de Huguenau un irrefrenable anhelo de proximidad humana. Corrió campo a través, deteniéndose de vez en cuando para recobrar el aliento. Notó que olía a chacinería y de nuevo le vino a la mente el hecho de que las puertas de la imprenta no estaban cerradas, que los saqueadores y los ladrones saldrían ahora de la cárcel como una tromba, y, con temor redoblado, procuró seguir adelante, con todas sus fuerzas, para llegar a casa.

Hanna Wendling yacía en cama con fiebre alta. El doctor Kessel lo atribuía al haber dejado noche tras noche las ventanas abiertas, pero luego hubo de admitir que se trataba de una gripe.

Cuando se produjo la explosión y los cristales de las ventanas cayeron dentro de la habitación, Hanna no se sorprendió en absoluto: ella no tenía la culpa de que estuvieran cerradas, la habían obligado a cerrarlas y, como Heinrich no había hecho que pusieran rejas, ahora, naturalmente, entrarían los ladrones. Casi tranquila, se dijo: «Es el asalto de los de abajo», y aguardó a ver qué sucedería. Pero como el ruido era más ensordecedor cada vez, reflexionó y, consciente de pronto de que debía reunirse con el chico, saltó de la cama.

Se agarró con fuerza a los barrotes de la cabecera intentando ordenar sus ideas: el chico estaba en la cocina, sí, se acordaba de que lo había enviado abajo para evitar que se contagiara. También ella tenía que ir abajo.

Una violenta corriente de aire entró en la habitación. Todas las puertas y todas las ventanas habían saltado de sus marcos y, en el primer piso, se habían roto todos los cristales de la fachada, pues en esta parte del valle la onda expansiva se había notado con especial intensidad. La detonación siguiente había hecho saltar por los aires la mitad de las tejas del tejado. Si la casa no hubiera tenido calefacción central, el incendio habría sido inevitable. De todos modos, Hanna no notaba el frío, apenas percibía el ruido ensordecedor; ni comprendía lo que estaba sucediendo ni intentaba comprenderlo: se precipitó hacia la cocina pasando por delante de la doncella que chillaba y a la que encontró en el cuarto de los armarios.

En la cocina se dio cuenta de que debía de hacer frío, pues allí se estaba muy bien. Allá abajo las ventanas no habían sufrido desperfectos. En un rincón estaba la cocinera, muy acurrucada y con el chico en el regazo. El gato estaba tranquilamente tumbado delante del hogar. Y aquel extraño olor a quemado no impregnaba la nariz; olía a limpio y a tibieza. Se tenía la sensación de hallarse a salvo. Después se dio cuenta de que, con una incomprensible presencia de ánimo, había cogido la colcha de la cama. Se envolvió en ella y se sentó en el rincón más apartado de la cocina; había que tomar precauciones para no contagiar al muchacho y, cuando él quiso acercársele, lo rechazó. La doncella la había seguido y ahora llegaban también el jardinero y su mujer:

—El cuartel está ardiendo… allá.

El jardinero señalaba hacia la ventana, pero las mujeres, sin atreverse a acercarse hasta ella, se

quedaron donde estaban. Hanna se sentía completamente lúcida.

—Hay que esperar —dijo.

Y se arrebujó más en la colcha. De pronto, por alguna razón, se apagó la luz eléctrica. La doncella volvió a chillar. Hanna repitió de nuevo en la oscuridad:

—Hay que esperar…

Después volvió a hundirse en una especie de letargo. El muchacho se había quedado dormido en el regazo de la cocinera. La doncella y la mujer del jardinero estaban sentadas en los cajones del carbón; el jardinero, apoyado en el hogar. Las ventanas seguían crujiendo y, de vez en cuando, allá afuera, se desplomaba una nueva hilera de tejas. Estaban sentados en la oscuridad, mirando todos hacia las ventanas iluminadas por el resplandor, mirándolas inmóviles, y su inmovilidad fue aumentando por momentos.

Por el camino que lleva a la penitenciaría, Esch descendía sin aliento; el fusil se le había caído del hombro y lo llevaba en la mano, como un soldado dispuesto a atacar. Más o menos a medio camino, oyó el griterío de un grupo que se acercaba corriendo. Se lanzó sobre los matorrales para dejarlos pasar. Eran unas doscientas personas, gentuza de toda clase, entre ellos los presos, reconocibles por sus ropas grises. Unos intentaban cantar *La Marsellesa*, otros *La Internacional.* Una voz de sargento gritaba sin cesar: «¡En filas de a cuatro!», pero nadie le hacía caso. Delante del cortejo, un muñeco se balanceaba por encima de las cabezas de los primeros del grupo: colgaba de un palo, de una especie de horca; lo habían formado rellenando el uniforme de uno de los guardianes de la cárcel (probablemente lo habían desnudado para ello); el muñeco llevaba un letrero colgando del pecho y, a la oscilante luz de las llamas, Esch pudo descifrarlo: EL COMANDANTE DE LA PLAZA. Incluso llevaban a un niño, sentado en los hombros de uno de ellos; era una niña pequeña que se parecía a Marguerite, pero Esch no le prestó mucha atención; dejó que pasaran todos y, para evitar posibles encuentros con otros que vinieran tras ellos, continuó corriendo por el prado que había junto al camino.

Ante él aparecieron los faros de un coche. A Esch se le heló la sangre en las venas: ¡Solo podía ser el mayor!, el mayor que, inevitablemente, iba a echarse en brazos de los sublevados. ¡Había que detenerlo, detenerlo a cualquier precio! Esch salió de entre la maleza y se plantó en mitad del camino gritando y haciendo señales con las manos. Pero o no le vieron o no quisieron verle, y si no hubiera saltado hacia un lado le habrían atropellado. Tuvo el tiempo justo de comprobar que, en efecto, era el coche del mayor y que este iba con tres soldados, uno de ellos en el estribo. Quedó desolado mirando fijamente hacia el coche; después echó a correr tras él con todas las fuerzas de que era capaz; corría con un miedo cerval, esperando a cada momento verse obligado a asistir a un espectáculo espantoso. Delante de él, aunque algo lejos, sonaron disparos, luego un golpe estrepitoso parecido a una explosión, gritos y un ruido infernal. De un salto volvió a hundirse en la maleza.

La muchedumbre se había congregado ante los primeros edificios: alrededor todo se veía aún iluminado por el incendio. Ocultándose tras la maleza, logró alcanzar la verja de un primer jardín y, a su amparo, pudo acercarse. El coche, volcado sobre un costado, ardía junto a la maleza que bordeaba el camino. Al parecer, el conductor, al encontrarse con la masa de gente, o tal vez alcanzado por una piedra, había perdido el dominio del vehículo y había ido a chocar contra el talud lateral. Medio agachado ante un árbol contra el que había golpeado su cráneo, respiraba aún, aunque con dificultad, mientras uno de los soldados yacía en mitad del camino cuan largo era. El otro, en cambio, un suboficial, salido sin duda ileso del accidente, se hallaba rodeado por aquella jauría enloquecida. Bajo los puñetazos y los bastonazos hacía débiles movimientos de súplica; dijo algo inaudible entre tanto ruido y luego también él se desplomó. Esch se preguntaba si debía o no disparar contra aquella horda, cuando una llamarada azulada surgió del capó del motor y alguien gritó: «¡El coche va a explotar!». La muchedumbre se replegó hacia atrás y todos callaron en espera de la explosión. Pero como no pasó nada y el coche continuó ardiendo sin ruido, no tardaron en estallar gritos de «¡A la comandancia!», «¡Al ayuntamiento!», y el grupo se arremolinó en dirección a la ciudad.

Pero ¿dónde estaba el mayor? De pronto Esch lo supo con toda seguridad: debajo del coche y a punto de abrasarse vivo. Aguijoneado por el miedo, Esch trepó por la verja y saltó en dirección al coche; sacudió la carrocería, se le llenó la garganta de sollozos secos al comprobar que él solo no podía levantarla. Desesperado, de pie ante el vehículo en llamas, se abrasó las manos en un nuevo intento. Entonces se le acercó un hombre. Era el tercer soldado, ileso, pues había salido disparado por encima de la maleza y había ido a caer en el prado. Entre los dos lograron levantar un poco un lado del coche. Esch se arrastró por debajo, sosteniendo el coche con la espalda mientras el soldado tiraba del mayor. «¡Gracias a Dios!» Pero con ello no todo quedaba solucionado; había que apartarse cuanto antes del peligroso automóvil. Así que trasladaron al mayor, inconsciente, por encima del talud y lo dejaron en el prado detrás de unos arbustos.

Esch se arrodilló junto al mayor y observó su cara; su expresión era apacible y respiraba con

regularidad, aunque débilmente. El corazón también le latía de un modo acompasado —Esch había abierto el capote y la guerrera del mayor haciendo saltar los botones— y, a excepción de algunas magulladuras y quemaduras superficiales, no se le descubría ninguna herida. El soldado permanecía de pie junto a ellos:

—Todavía quedan los otros…

Esch se levantó pesadamente. Con fatiga desconocida. Le dolían todos los miembros. No obstante, una vez más hizo acopio de fuerzas y pusieron en lugar seguro al suboficial herido. Y dejaron en la maleza los cadáveres del conductor y del soldado muertos en el accidente.

Hecho esto, Esch se echó en la hierba junto al mayor:

—He de recobrar el aliento, aunque sea un instante… No puedo más.

Tan agotado estaba que ni siquiera se dio cuenta de que, por encima de los tejados de la ciudad, surgían enormes llamaradas.

—¡Los muy cerdos han pegado fuego al ayuntamiento! —dijo el soldado.

En el Hospital Militar todo andaba revuelto.

En los primeros momentos huyeron todos al jardín, sin consideración ninguna hacia quienes no podían levantarse; nadie hizo caso de sus gritos y de sus lamentos.

Kuhlenbeck tuvo que recurrir a toda su autoridad para restablecer el orden. Él mismo en persona llevó a la planta baja los casos más graves; los cargaba en brazos, como si fueran niños pequeños, y su voz retumbaba en todos los corredores, y, si sus órdenes no se cumplían al instante, reñía con palabras indecentes a todo el que pillara por delante, incluso a Flurschütz o a la enfermera Mathilde. La enfermera Carla había desaparecido y no se la encontraba por ninguna parte.

Al fin todo fue organizado. Las camas del destrozado piso superior fueron bajadas y, poco a poco, los pacientes fueron acudiendo. Faltaban algunos. Estaban en el jardín o más lejos aún, en el bosque o donde fuera.

Flurschütz y un enfermero se dedicaron a localizarlos. Uno de los que encontraron fuera del jardín fue Gödicke. No había llegado muy lejos; de pie en la ladera del monte, lugar que había escogido como observatorio, alzaba al cielo sus dos bastones.

Se hubiera dicho que reía a carcajadas.

Y, en efecto, cuando se acercaron, le oyeron reír con aquella risa brutal que todos los internos llevaban meses esperando oír.

No hizo el menor caso de los dos recién llegados, que le llamaban a gritos, y, cuando se acercaron dispuestos a llevárselo con ellos, enarboló amenazador sus bastones.

Flurschütz quedó un tanto perplejo:

—Vamos, Gödicke, venga usted…

Gödicke señaló con los bastones las llamas que se veían a lo lejos y, como en trance, rugió:

—El Juicio Final… Resucitó de entre los muertos… Resucitado de entre los muertos… Aquel que no haya resucitado irá a parar al infierno… El diablo os llevará a todos… a todos vosotros… Vendrá ahora mismo a buscaros…

¿Qué se podía hacer? Pero, tras observarlo un instante, al enfermero se le ocurrió lo más acertado:

—Ludwig, es hora de cenar, baja de tu andamio.

Gödicke se calló. Desde la pelambrera de su barba, lanzó una mirada recelosa y, finalmente, se unió a ellos cojeando.

Sin aliento y temblando atravesó Huguenau el jardín y llegó a la imprenta. De pronto, no sabía qué le había traído hasta allí. Luego, comprendió. ¡La maquinaria! Entró. El oscuro local estaba iluminado por el resplandor de las llamas que entraba desde fuera y todo se veía tranquilo y apacible como en un domingo. Huguenau se sentó ante la máquina impresora con el fusil entre las piernas. Se sentía decepcionado; la máquina no merecía el gran esfuerzo que había hecho: ahí la tenía, fría, insensible, limitándose a proyectar sombras inquietantes que producían desazón a Huguenau. Si la banda de criminales venía realmente, esta puerca máquina merecía en realidad que la rompieran a pedazos. Aunque es una hermosa máquina… Le pone las manos encima y le molesta notar el hierro tan frío. «¡Mierda!», pero ¿qué es lo que le irrita tanto? Huguenau se encoge de hombros… mira hacia el patio, hacia el almacén donde se celebran las preces dominicales. ¿Predicará Esch el próximo domingo? *Haïssez les ennemis de la sainte religion.* Charlatanería de curas. Un almacén vacío, ese es su negocio… ¿Qué tiene que perder un tipo de esos? No tiene preocupaciones… predica los domingos y ahora está allí arriba, con su mujer, consolándose mutuamente, mientras uno tiene que estarse sentado aquí junto a una puerca máquina.

De nuevo olvida por qué ha venido. Apoya su fusil contra la máquina. En el patio, olfatea el aire: otra vez el olor a chacinería. Sin duda hoy no se cenará… Bueno, algo habrá allí arriba; ella no dejará que su

buen Esch se muera de hambre.

Al llegar al pasillo de arriba se sobresalta porque la puerta de su habitación se ha salido de los goznes. Algo hay que no marcha. La puerta está tan encajada que le cuesta trabajo abrirla y, dentro del cuarto, el panorama es aún peor: el espejo ya no cuelga sobre el lavabo sino que está en el suelo sobre los destrozados objetos de tocador. ¡Cuánta confusión! Resulta incomprensible e inquietante, pero aquellos trozos parecen trozos de huesos. Huguenau se sienta en el sofá, le gustaría poder explicarse lo sucedido, pero no quiere pensar… Tiene que venir alguien, explicárselo todo bien y tranquilizarle… acariciarle el cabello.

Entonces se le ocurre que, de todos modos, ha de llamar a la señora Esch y enseñarle los desperfectos… si no, al final, le hará responsable a él… Y, desde luego, no se le pasa por las mientes tener que pagar daños que no ha causado. Pero en el preciso momento en que se dispone a llamarla, ella entra precipitadamente en el cuarto, pues le ha oído llegar:

—¿Dónde está mi marido?

La vista de un rostro conocido produjo en Huguenau una tranquilidad reconfortante y excitante. Le sonrió de corazón:

—Mamá Esch…

La mira con expresión radiante y amistosa… «Ahora todo se arreglará, ella me acostará…»

Pero ella parecía no verle siquiera:

—¿Dónde está mi marido?

Pregunta tan tonta le molestó. ¿Qué demonios quería ella de Esch? Si no está, es que no está… Le contestó con tono grosero:

—¿Cómo quiere que yo sepa por dónde anda? Ya vendrá a comer.

Tal vez ella no le había oído bien, porque se le acercó, le cogió por los hombros y le gritó a la cara:

—Se ha ido corriendo, se ha ido corriendo y con el fusil… He oído tiros.

Un atisbo de esperanza: ¡a Esch le han pegado un tiro! Pero ¿por qué tenía esta mujer la voz tan apesadumbrada? ¿Por qué estaba funcionando al revés? Él deseaba encontrar en ella calma y, en lugar de eso, tenía que tranquilizarla, ¡y encima por culpa del maldito Esch!

Ella seguía implorando:

—¿Dónde está Esch? —sin soltarle los hombros.

Confuso y furioso al mismo tiempo, le dio unos golpecitos en los gruesos antebrazos, como se hace con un niño que llora. Incluso le hubiera gustado hacer algo por ella, le acarició los brazos de arriba abajo, pero de sus labios no salieron palabras amables:

—¿A qué lamentarse tanto por Esch? ¿No está ya harta de él…? ¿No estoy yo aquí, a su lado…?

Y, mientras hablaba así, se dio cuenta por primera vez de que le estaba pidiendo algo más sustancioso… una especie de indemnización por lo que le debía. También ella lo intuyó, porque murmuró:

—Señor Huguenau, por el amor de Dios, señor Huguenau…

Pero, casi perdida la voluntad, apenas opuso resistencia a su acuciante y jadeante insistencia. Como un condenado que ayuda a su propio verdugo, sin mediar un solo beso, le desabrochó los pantalones y entre los muslos abiertos y alzados de la mujer, cayó él sobre el sofá arrastrándola consigo.

Al terminar, lo primero que ella dijo fue:

—¡Salve a mi marido!

A Huguenau poco le importaba. Ahora aquel podía vivir cuanto le diera la gana. Pero al cabo de un instante, prorrumpió ella en estridentes gritos: la ventana se había iluminado de pronto con un resplandor rojizo, haces anaranjados y amarillos se elevaban por el aire, el ayuntamiento estaba ardiendo. Ella se echó en el suelo, hecha un ovillo informe… Ella, era ella quien tenía la culpa de todo:

—Jesús María, ¿qué he hecho?, ¿qué he hecho? —Luego se arrastró hasta él—: Sálvele, sálvele…

Huguenau se había acercado a la ventana. Estaba harto. O sea que ahora también aquí había empezado el baile. Estaba más que harto de lo que sucedía afuera, muy harto. ¿Y qué quería de él aquella mujer? En definitiva, el responsable era Esch… ¡Ojalá muriera abrasado allí fuera con el mayor! A los santos siempre los han quemado. Y ahora, además, empezaría el bandidaje… y otra vez se había olvidado de cerrar la imprenta. Usó esto como pretexto para irse de allí de un modo airoso:

—Veré si le encuentro.

Pero mientras salía, pensó que si ahora se tropezaba con Esch le echaría escaleras abajo.

Sin embargo, en la imprenta todo seguía en orden, como antes. El fusil continuaba allí, apoyado en la máquina, y esta todavía proyectaba sus inquietantes sombras. Rojos, negros, amarillos, anaranjados, los haces de llamas del ayuntamiento se proyectaban hacia el cielo, mientras del cuartel y de los almacenes de municiones continuaba saliendo aquella espesa humareda de color pardo sucio. Los árboles frutales extendían hacia lo alto sus vacías ramas. Huguenau contempló el espectáculo y, de pronto, le pareció que todo era justo… que todo era como debía ser, hasta la máquina volvió a gustarle… Todo era justo, todo estaba en orden, él mismo había sido restituido a su lúcido realismo… Ahora solo faltaba un punto final,

¡y todo sería perfecto!

Volvió a subir sin hacer ruido, lanzó una prudente mirada a la destrozada cocina, se deslizó hasta el cajón del pan y se cortó una gran rebanada y, como no encontró nada más, regresó a la imprenta, se sentó cómodamente, colocó el fusil entre sus piernas y comenzó a comer poco a poco… respecto a los saqueadores, ya encontraría modo de quitárselos de encima.

Esch y el soldado se hallaban de rodillas junto al mayor. Querían hacerle recobrar el conocimiento, y le frotaban el pecho y las manos con hierba húmeda. Cuando por fin abrió los ojos, le movieron brazos y piernas hasta comprobar que no tenía nada roto. Pero no respondió a sus llamadas; yacía totalmente tendido y tan solo sus manos empezaron a moverse intranquilas, cogiendo tierra húmeda y escarbando en busca de algún terrón que desmigar.

Era evidente que había que llevárselo de allí cuanto antes. Pedir ayuda a la ciudad resultaba imposible; o sea, que debían arreglárselas solos. Entretanto, el suboficial herido se había reanimado hasta tal punto que era capaz de sentarse; por tanto, podían dejarlo solo un rato y, así, decidieron que lo primero era llevar al mayor a casa de Esch. A campo traviesa sería mejor, pues el camino resultaría demasiado peligroso.

En el preciso momento en que deliberaban sobre la mejor forma de transportarlo, pareció que el mayor quería hablar: levantó un poco la mano, que asía un puñado de tierra que iba escurriéndosele de entre los dedos, y desplegó los labios inclinándolos hacia delante, pero dejó caer la mano y no llegó a pronunciar el más leve sonido. Esch acercó mucho su oído a la boca del mayor, y esperó. Al fin, entendió:

—Caído del caballo… un obstáculo sin importancia y, sin embargo, caído… La pata delantera rota, la derecha… Yo mismo le mataré de un tiro… Un deshonor se borra con una bala… —y luego, ya con un tono más claro, como si buscara aprobación— … con una bala, no con armas impropias de caballeros…

—¿Qué dice? —preguntó el soldado.

—Cree que se ha caído del caballo… —contestó Esch en voz baja—. Pero ahora manos a la obra… Si no fuera esta maldita claridad… Por si acaso, nos llevaremos los fusiles.

El mayor había vuelto a cerrar los ojos. Lo levantaron con cuidado, y, deteniéndose con frecuencia para cambiarse de lado, fueron transportándolo a través de los campos pastosos y húmedos; la tierra humedecida se pegaba a las suelas de las botas y pesaba. El mayor abrió los ojos una vez, vio la ciudad en llamas y, mirando directamente a Esch, dijo con tono autoritario:

—Gas… lanzallamas… apáguenlo.

Luego volvió a hundirse en su somnolencia.

Una vez llegados a casa de Esch, este despidió al soldado: debía regresar cuanto antes junto a su camarada (también él acudiría más tarde); aquí ya encontraría quien le ayudase a subir al mayor. Así pues, de momento, lo dejaron sobre el banco que había delante de la glorieta. En cuanto el soldado se hubo alejado, Esch se acercó sin hacer ruido a la casa, apoyó el fusil en la pared del corredor y abrió la trampa del sótano. Después cargó al mayor sobre su espalda y lo entró tanteando con cuidado la escalera al descender. Una vez abajo, lo acomodó sobre un montón de patatas que antes había cubierto con una tela gruesa. Encendió la lámpara de petróleo que colgaba del sucio muro y tapó el tragaluz con trapos y tablas para que no se filtrara hacia fuera ningún rayo de luz. Finalmente, en una hoja de papel que colocó entre las manos cruzadas del mayor, garabateó: «¡Mi comandante!, perdió usted el conocimiento en el accidente del coche. Volveré enseguida. Atentamente, Esch». Volvió a mirar la lámpara y comprobó que tuviera el combustible necesario: tal vez estuviera fuera mucho tiempo. Hasta la puerta del sótano había tres escalones; antes de abrirla, se volvió otra vez, observó casi con vacilación la baja bóveda y al hombre inmóvil tendido en toda su longitud. De no ser por el peculiar olor del petróleo, se diría que era un panteón.

Subió lentamente. En el corredor escuchó los ruidos del piso de arriba. Nada se movía… Bueno, su mujer ya se habría tranquilizado; el herido de la ciudad era mucho más importante. Se cargó el fusil a la espalda y se encaminó a la ciudad.

Pero sus pensamientos pertenecían al hombre que yacía en el sótano con la lámpara de petróleo justo sobre su cabeza. Cuando la luz se apague, el Redentor estará cerca. Es preciso que la luz se extinga para que pueda recomenzar la cuenta del tiempo.

Huguenau acababa de concluirse el pan y estaba pensando cómo procurarse algún otro alimento, cuando, a la viva claridad que reinaba fuera, distinguió una silueta en el jardín. Cogió con rapidez el fusil, pero enseguida se dio cuenta de que solo se trataba de Esch, el cual llevaba a la espalda una especie de saco. ¡O sea, que el bueno del pastor incluso se había unido a los que se dedicaban al pillaje! No sería de extrañar, desde luego; pronto se vería, y, lleno de curiosidad, esperó a que se acercara con su carga. En el patio, los

pasos de Esch sonaban lentos y pesados; pasó mucho rato hasta que apareció frente a la ventana. Y entonces Huguenau se quedó casi sin aliento: ¡Esch llevaba un hombre! ¡Esch llevaba al mayor! No cabía posibilidad de error: Esch traía al mayor. Huguenau se deslizó de puntillas hasta la puerta y sacó la cabeza por la abertura —no cabía la menor duda: era el mayor— y vio cómo Esch desaparecía con su fardo en el sótano.

Huguenau estaba sumamente intrigado por ver cómo se desarrollarían los acontecimientos. Y cuando Esch volvió a aparecer y se dirigió a la calle, también Huguenau se echó el fusil a la espalda y le siguió a prudente distancia.

Las calles que conducían al ayuntamiento estaban por completo iluminadas de una luz cegadora; en las travesías, las casas proyectaban sombras agudas y oscilantes. No se veía a nadie. Todo el mundo había acudido corriendo a la plaza del Mercado, de la que llegaba un sordo tumulto. Huguenau no puede dejar de pensar que en estas desiertas callejas cualquiera puede entregarse al pillaje; él mismo podría entrar ahora en alguna casa y coger lo que le diera la gana sin que nadie se lo impidiera (desde luego, pero ¿qué podría sacar de uno de esos tenduchos?, y la expresión «caza mayor» le viene a la memoria). Esch doblaba ya la esquina; así pues, aquel pillo farisaico no iba al ayuntamiento. Pasaron un par de muchachos corriendo; Huguenau aprestó el fusil dispuesto a golpear con él. De una calle lateral salió un hombre que se le acercó vacilante: con la mano izquierda sostenía convulsivamente por el manillar una bicicleta, la derecha le colgaba, como rota, a lo largo del cuerpo. Huguenau miró con horror su rostro, destrozado a golpes, uno de cuyos ojos miraba sin ver, petrificado. Esforzándose únicamente en sostener con firmeza su bicicleta, como si quisiera llevársela consigo al más allá, el herido pasó tambaleándose por su lado. Culatazos en el rostro, pensó Huguenau para sí, y empuñó con más fuerza el fusil. Del portal de una casa salió un perro siguiendo el rastro del herido y lamiendo las gotas de sangre caídas. Huguenau había perdido de vista a Esch y apretó el paso. En el cruce siguiente vio de nuevo el brillo de su bayoneta. Le siguió más deprisa. Esch caminaba hacia delante, sin mirar a derecha ni a izquierda; ni siquiera el ayuntamiento en llamas atrajo su atención. Sus pasos ya no resonaban sobre el adoquinado, porque aquí el suelo no estaba pavimentado; entonces torció por una calleja que corría a lo largo de la muralla. Algo impulsaba a Huguenau hacia delante: ahora se hallaba a unos veinte pasos de Esch, quien proseguía tranquilamente su camino. ¿Debía golpearlo con la culata? No, eso sería absurdo; lo que hacía falta era poner punto final. Y entonces una especie de iluminación se apodera de él: inclina el fusil, con un par de saltos felinos, semejantes a los pasos de un tango, se acerca a Esch y le hunde la bayoneta en la huesuda espalda. Para asombro de su asesino, Esch todavía camina unos pasos con toda serenidad y luego cae de bruces contra el suelo sin el menor ruido.

Huguenau, de pie junto al caído, roza con un pie una de las manos, la que yace sobre la huella de un neumático grabada en la espesa porquería de la calle. ¿Debe pisarla? Sin duda, está muerto. Huguenau le queda agradecido: ¡todo estaba bien! Se agachó y clavó su mirada en aquel rostro, vuelto de lado, erizado de pelos. Al no ver en él aquel rictus burlón tan odiado, se sintió satisfecho y, con benevolencia, casi con ternura, le dio al cadáver unos golpecitos en el hombro.

Todo estaba bien.

Cambió los fusiles. Dejó junto al muerto el suyo, manchado de sangre, precaución del todo innecesaria en un día como aquel, pero le gustaba actuar conforme a un orden. Y emprendió el camino de regreso. La muralla estaba toda ella iluminada por el resplandor procedente del ayuntamiento, los árboles proyectaban contra ella sus sombras, un último haz amarillo anaranjado salió disparado del tejado del ayuntamiento —Huguenau no pudo evitar acordarse del hombre que, en aquel cuadro de Colmar, ascendía hacia el cielo entreabierto y le hubiera gustado mucho estrechar su alzada mano derecha, tal era su estado de ánimo, alegre y sin nada que le pesara—, después, la torre del ayuntamiento se derrumbó y el fuego adquirió un tono pardo rojizo.

La Casa de las Rosas, medio destruida, seguía a oscuras y silenciosa en medio del viento nocturno que, aquí, en lo alto, soplaba muy fuerte.

En la cocina nada había cambiado. Las seis personas continuaban sin moverse, con la mirada fija; todos seguían sentados, inmóviles, más inmóviles tal vez que antes, como encadenados y enganchados a los cables de la espera. Ni dormían ni velaban, tampoco sabían cuánto duraría aquella situación. Únicamente el muchacho roncaba. A Hanna se le había caído la colcha de los hombros, pero no tenía frío. Una vez dijo en medio del silencio:

—Hay que esperar.

Pero sin duda los otros no la oyeron. Y, no obstante, escuchaban con atención el vacío, escuchaban las voces que venían de afuera. Y aunque en los oídos de Hanna seguía sonando la expresión «el asalto de los de abajo» y aún no le había encontrado sentido —palabras absurdas, ruido absurdo—, seguía, no obstante, escuchando para ver si eran aquellas absurdas palabras las que la gente gritaba allá afuera. El grifo del

agua goteaba rítmicamente. Ninguna de las seis personas se movía. Tal vez los otros también percibían la llamada de la invasión, ya que, pese a la enorme diferencia social, pese a su aislamiento y falta de unión, todos se habían convertido en una colectividad; un círculo encantado los rodea a todos, una cadena cuyos eslabones eran ellos mismos, cadena que no podría romperse sin ocasionar graves perjuicios. Y a partir de este encantamiento, de este estado de trance en común, se comprende que para Hanna la llamada de la invasión resultara cada vez más clara, tan clara como jamás hubiera podido percibirla con sus oídos corporales. Como impulsada por la fuerza del común prestar atención, la llamada se acercaba nadando en la corriente de dicha fuerza, fuerza que, sin embargo, carecía de potencia; era una fuerza que solo consistía en aprehender y escuchar; y la llamada era muy fuerte, su voz, cada vez más poderosa, era como el viento huracanado que soplaba allá afuera. El perro aullaba en el jardín; ladró varias veces. Después, también el perro enmudece y ella ya solo oye la voz. Y la voz le dictó órdenes: Hanna se incorpora, se pone de pie, los demás no parecen darse cuenta, como tampoco se dan cuenta de que abre la puerta y abandona la pieza. Anda descalza, pero no lo sabe. Sus pies desnudos pisan un revestimiento de cemento: era el corredor; luego pasan por cinco escalones de piedra; luego por encima del linóleo: es la antecocina; por el parquet y por las alfombras: era el vestíbulo; por una estera de fibra de coco, muy reseca, y fragmentos de tejas, por las losas de un sendero del jardín. Y en este caminar en línea recta, que casi debería calificarse de marcha, únicamente las plantas de sus pies saben el camino, porque los ojos solo conocen la meta (y, cuando se aproxima a la puerta de la verja, también ella la ve, ¡ve la meta allí!, al final de la senda pavimentada, al final de aquel larguísimo puente, ve, allá lejos, al ladrón, al hombre, que, en su afán por saltar la verja, se ha subido a ella desde el pretil del puente), un hombre vestido con el uniforme gríseo de los presidiarios cuelga allí, como un bloque de piedra gris. Y no se mueve. Ella empieza a avanzar hacia el puente con las manos tendidas hacia delante, deja caer la colcha que la envuelve, el camisón se le hincha por efecto del viento y avanza así hacia el hombre inmóvil. Pero, ya sea porque en la cocina los otros se han dado cuenta al fin de que ella se ha ido, ya sea porque ella los ha atraído a través de la mágica cadena que los une a todos, el jardinero la sigue, la sigue la doncella, la sigue la cocinera, la sigue también la mujer del jardinero y, aunque con voces débiles y estranguladas, llaman a su señora.

Sin duda fue lo extraño de semejante procesión encabezada por aquella mujer de blanco, vestida como un fantasma, lo que puso los pelos de punta al ladrón y lo dejó tan paralizado que apenas tuvo fuerzas para retirar la pierna levantada. Pero cuando la tuvo de nuevo al otro lado, aún se volvió para contemplar aquel cuadro fantasmagórico, y luego salió corriendo y se perdió en la oscuridad.

Mientras tanto, Hanna seguía andando y, al llegar a la verja, pasó las manos por entre los barrotes como por entre las rejas de una ventana, igual que si quisiera decir a alguien adiós con la mano. De la ciudad llegaban todavía los reflejos del incendio, pero ya no se oían explosiones y el encanto se había roto. Incluso el viento había cesado. Ella se desplomó, somnolienta, junto a la verja, y entre el jardinero y la cocinera la llevaron de nuevo a la casa y le prepararon una cama en la habitación del servicio, junto a la cocina.

(En la habitación del servicio, junto a la cocina, murió al día siguiente Hanna Wendling, víctima de una grave gripe pulmonar.)

Huguenau caminaba a paso de marcha hacia su domicilio. Delante de una casa lloraba un niño de apenas tres años. «¿Dónde se habrá metido Marguerite?», pensó. Alzó al niño, le mostró los magníficos fuegos artificiales que desde allí se veían brillar en la plaza del Mercado, y estuvo tanto rato imitando el chisporroteo de las llamas, los crujidos de la viguería que se desplomaba, sss, ssscht, schtchtchfrac, que, al fin, el niño rió. Después lo entró en la casa y le advirtió a la madre que, en tiempos como aquellos, no se podía dejar a un niño en la calle sin vigilarlo.

Llegado a su casa, apoyó el fusil en la pared del corredor, tal y como había hecho Esch, abrió la trampa de la bodega y bajó a ver al mayor.

El mayor no había cambiado de postura desde que Esch se fuera; seguía echado sobre el montón de patatas, con la hoja de papel entre los dedos, pero sus ojos azules estaban abiertos y miraban fijamente la lámpara. Al entrar Huguenau, no apartó la mirada de la luz. Huguenau carraspeó y, como el mayor no se moviera, se sintió ofendido. No estaban los tiempos como para prorrogar tanto una pueril desavenencia. Cogió el taburete que solía usarse para seleccionar las patatas y, haciendo una inclinación, tomó asiento junto al mayor:

—Mi comandante, comprendo perfectamente que tenga motivos para no querer verme, pero más pronto o más tarde todo se olvida. A fin y al cabo, las circunstancias han demostrado que yo tenía razón, y no quisiera silenciar el hecho de que mi comandante me juzgó a la luz de una falsa impresión. Mi comandante no debe olvidar que he sido objeto de una intriga muy sórdida; aunque no está bien hablar mal de los muertos, mi comandante recordará el desprecio con que, desde el primer momento, me trató ese pastor. ¡Y jamás una palabra de agradecimiento! ¿Ha tenido mi comandante una palabra de

aprobación para todas las fiestas que he organizado en honor de mi comandante? En alguna ocasión un «se lo agradezco», pero guardando siempre las distancias. Mas no quiero pecar de injusto: una vez mi comandante me dio la mano espontáneamente, cuando inauguramos el Bismark de hierro; como mi comandante verá, me acuerdo muy bien de todas las amabilidades de mi comandante, pero incluso en aquella oportunidad, tenía mi comandante una expresión irónica en los labios. ¡Si usted supiera cuánto he odiado a Esch cuando ponía aquella mueca suya de ironía! Yo siempre me quedaba a un lado, si se me permite la expresión. ¿Y por qué? Pues porque, desde el primer instante, nunca he pertenecido al clan… Un extraño, por así decirlo, un refugiado, como solía decir Esch con complacencia, pero esa no era razón para burlarse de mí y apartarme a un lado. Yo tenía que empequeñecerme —también esta es una expresión suya—, yo tenía que empequeñecerme para que el señor pastor creciera y pudiera darse importancia ante mi comandante. Lo comprendí a la perfección, y mi comandante puede estar seguro de que es cosa que mortifica a un hombre; y también las alusiones que usted me ha dirigido llamándome «mala persona», ¡oh, sí!, también esas alusiones las he comprendido a la perfección; mi comandante recordará que se pasó toda una velada hablando de la maldad. No es de extrañar que un hombre al que se trata así al final se comporte alguna vez como una mala persona de verdad; admito que, de hecho, podía parecerlo y que, quizá hoy, mi comandante acabe llamándome chantajista y asesino y, sin embargo, solo son apariencias. En realidad no es así, y resulta imposible explicarlo con exactitud; además, mi comandante tampoco tendrá el menor interés en saber la verdad. Sí, también entonces habló mucho mi comandante de amor y, desde aquel momento, Esch no paró de parlotear hablando de amor —realmente, oír su palabrería daba ganas de vomitar—, pero cuando se habla constantemente del amor, por lo menos debería intentarse comprender al prójimo; por favor, mi comandante, ya sé que yo no puedo pedir tanto, un hombre de la posición de mi comandante jamás tolerará que semejantes sentimientos le arrastren hacia un hombre como yo, un vulgar desertor, aunque me permito decirle, con todo respeto, que Esch no era tan superior ni mucho mejor que yo… No sé si mi comandante comprende bien lo que quiero decir, pero le ruego, mi comandante, que tenga paciencia… —Limpió los cristales de sus gafas mirando fijamente al mayor, que no había hecho aún el menor movimiento ni había emitido el más leve sonido—. Le ruego encarecidamente a mi comandante que no imagine que le retengo prisionero en este sótano para obligarle a oírme. Fuera hay un lío espantoso y si mi comandante saliera lo colgarían de un farol. Mi comandante podrá cerciorarse mañana mismo; por los clavos de Cristo, tenga confianza en mí, al menos una vez…

Huguenau hablaba en estos términos a aquel muñeco viviente e inmóvil, hasta que, al fin, se dio cuenta de que el mayor no le oía. Pero se negaba a creerlo:

—Le ruego que me perdone, mi comandante está exhausto y yo no paro de hablar. Voy a buscar algo de comer.

Se precipitó hacia arriba. La señora Esch, hecha un ovillo en la silla de la cocina, gimoteaba convulsa. Cuando él entró se sobresaltó:

—¿Dónde está mi marido?

—No le pasa nada, ya no tardará ¿Tiene usted algo de comida? Lo necesito para un herido.

—¿Está herido mi marido?

—No, ya le he dicho que no tardará. Deme algo que pueda comerse. ¿Podría hacerme una tortilla? No, tardaría demasiado…

Fue al comedor; sobre la mesa había un trozo de embutido. Sin preguntar nada, lo cogió y lo puso entre dos rebanadas de pan. La señora Esch, que le había seguido, gritó alarmada:

—¡Deje eso! ¡Es para mi marido!

Huguenau tuvo la desagradable impresión de que no está bien robarle a un muerto; tal vez le traería mala suerte al mayor comer algo destinado a un muerto. Por otra parte, el embutido no era precisamente lo más adecuado para el mayor. Pensó un momento:

—Está bien, pero leche sí tendrá… Usted siempre tiene leche en casa.

Sí, tenía leche. Llenó un pistero y lo bajó con sumo cuidado.

—Mi comandante, leche, estupenda leche fresca… —le gritó con voz animada.

El mayor no se movió. Por lo visto, tampoco la leche era lo adecuado. Huguenau se sintió molesto; tal vez debía haberle traído vino, el vino le habría reanimado y dado fuerzas… Parece tan débil… bueno, de todos modos, ¡probaremos! Y Huguenau se inclinó sobre el mayor, levantó la cabeza del viejo, que, sin voluntad ni fuerzas, se dejó hacer e incluso abrió obediente los labios cuando Huguenau le introdujo en la boca el pitón del recipiente. Y cuando el mayor bebió la leche, que fluía poco a poco en su boca, Huguenau se sintió feliz. Salió corriendo en busca de otra ración; ya en la puerta se volvió y vio que el mayor había vuelto la cabeza para ver adónde iba. Huguenau le hizo un gesto amistoso con la cabeza y con la mano:

—Enseguida vuelvo.

Cuando volvió a bajar, el mayor seguía mirando hacia la puerta y sonreía, le sonreía a él. Bebió un poco más, asió un dedo de Huguenau y se quedó dormido.

Huguenau permaneció allí sentado con el dedo en el puño del mayor. Leyó el papel que el mayor tenía sobre el estómago y ocultó aquella prueba. Naturalmente, no la necesitaría y, si se veía en una situación difícil, respondería que Esch le había confiado la custodia del mayor. De todos modos, era preferible redoblar las precauciones. De cuando en cuando intentaba, con mucho cuidado, retirar el dedo, pero entonces el mayor se despertaba, sonreía un poco y, sin soltar el dedo, volvía a dormirse. El taburete era muy duro e incómodo. Y así pasaron la noche.

Cuando empezó a amanecer, Huguenau consiguió librarse de la mano del mayor. No es una pequeñez tirarse una noche entera mal acurrucado en un taburete.

Salió a la calle. Todavía estaba oscuro. La ciudad parecía tranquila. Se dirigió a la plaza del Mercado. El ayuntamiento, que había ardido hasta los cimientos, humeaba todavía con un humo espeso. El ejército y los bomberos habían puesto centinelas. Dos casas de la plaza del Mercado habían sido alcanzadas también por el fuego, y el mobiliario y demás enseres yacían ante ellas en abigarrado montón. De cuando en cuando volvía a funcionar una manguera para sofocar las brasas que se reavivaban. Huguenau observó que algunos individuos con uniforme de presidiario ayudaban en las mangueras y se ocupaban con afán en los trabajos de limpieza. Dirigió la palabra a un hombre que llevaba un brazal verde como el suyo y le preguntó qué más había sucedido allí, pues él había estado ocupado en otra parte. El hombre se lo contó encantado: bueno, en realidad, todo había concluido con el asalto al ayuntamiento. Entonces, amigos y enemigos se encontraron ante la hoguera, y trabajo tuvieron procurando que el fuego no se extendiera a las casas vecinas. Cierto que un par de tipos intentaron meterse en las casas para saquearlas, pero, como las mujeres gritaron tanto, hasta sus propios compañeros se les echaron encima. De todos modos, alguno acabó con la cabeza descalabrada, pero estuvo bien que así fuera, porque luego ya no se le ocurrió a nadie más dedicarse al pillaje. Ahora mismo se habían llevado a los heridos al hospital (ya era hora, pues sus gritos y sus lamentos eran tan horrorosos que no podía soportar seguir oyéndolos). Como es natural, se había telefoneado a Tréveris, pero también allí, como era lógico, había mucho jaleo, y por ello hasta que hubo pasado todo no habían llegado dos coches con hombres. Por lo demás, se decía que el comandante de la plaza había desaparecido…

Huguenau dijo que del comandante no había por qué preocuparse, pues él mismo lo había recogido, desde luego en un estado lamentable. En realidad, merecía que le concedieran la medalla del salvamento, porque ahora el viejo estaba bien atendido y, como ya había dicho, a salvo.

Saludó llevándose los dedos al sombrero, dio media vuelta y trotó hacia el Hospital Militar. Estaba amaneciendo.

No fue fácil dar enseguida con Kuhlenbeck, pero este apareció finalmente y, cuando vio a Huguenau, le gritó:

—¿Qué quiere usted, maldito payaso?

Huguenau adoptó la expresión más ofendida que pudo:

—Doctor, he de comunicarle que el señor Esch y yo hemos alojado esta noche en nuestra casa al comandante de la plaza gravemente herido… ¿Quiere usted dar las órdenes oportunas para que lo recojan de inmediato?

Kuhlenbeck corrió hacia la puerta:

—Doctor Flurschütz —tronó hacia el corredor.

Flurschütz acudió.

—Coja usted un coche… los coches están aquí ¿no…? y vaya con dos enfermeros a la barraca del periódico… ya sabe… Por lo demás —dijo en tono grosero dirigiéndose a Huguenau—, usted irá con ellos… —Luego pareció calmarse; incluso le dio la mano a Huguenau—. Bueno, es estupendo que lo hayan recogido ustedes…

Cuando llegaron al sótano, el mayor continuaba respirando acompasadamente medio dormido. Entretanto, Huguenau corrió a la redacción. No había mucho dinero en efectivo: solo el de la caja de gastos diarios, y los sellos; lo demás lo llevaba siempre encima hasta transferirlo al Banco de Colonia; sería una lástima dejar los sellos… No se sabía lo que podía pasar aún… ¡Tal vez habría actos de bandidaje! Cuando regresó, el mayor ya estaba instalado y había algunas personas alrededor del coche, preguntando qué había sucedido. Flurschütz se disponía a partir. Para Huguenau fue como si le hubieran dado un mazazo en la cabeza: ¡querían llevarse al mayor sin él! Y, de repente, comprendió que tampoco él podía quedarse allí, de ningún modo; no le apetecía nada en absoluto estar presente cuando trajeran a Esch.

—Enseguida voy, doctor —gritó—. ¡Voy enseguida!

—¿Cómo? ¿Quiere usted venir con nosotros?

—Por supuesto; tendré que declarar sobre este asunto, digo yo… Es solo un instante, por favor.

Subió a toda prisa. La señora Esch estaba ahora en la cocina, de rodillas, rezando. Cuando apareció Huguenau, se arrastró hasta él sin cambiar de postura. Pero él no hizo caso de sus ruegos sino que, dando

un salto, se fue a su cuarto, cogió de sus efectos cuanto pudo —que no era mucho—, los metió en un maletín de fibra, se sentó encima para poderlo cerrar y regresó corriendo.

—Listos —dijo al conductor. Y partieron.

En el hospital, Kuhlenbeck ya estaba en la puerta reloj en mano:

—Bueno, ¿qué tiene?

Flurschütz, que fue el primero en apearse, miró al mayor con sus ojos enrojecidos:

—Tal vez conmoción cerebral… tal vez algo peor…

—De todos modos —dijo Kuhlenbeck—, esto es un perfecto manicomio… ¡Y pensar que le llaman Hospital Militar…! En fin, veremos qué puede hacerse.

El mayor, que durante el camino había parpadeado ya varias veces mirando el blanquecino cielo matinal, se hallaba ahora despierto del todo. Cuando lo bajaron del coche, se intranquilizó; se volvió a uno y otro lado: era evidente que buscaba algo. Kuhlenbeck se le acercó y se inclinó sobre él:

—¿Se puede saber a qué viene todo esto, mi comandante?

Apenas hubo hablado, el mayor se puso furioso en grado sumo. Ya fuera porque había reconocido a Kuhlenbeck, ya fuera porque no le había reconocido, el caso es que, agarrándose de sus barbas, tiró de ellas convulsivamente hacia uno y otro lado. Los dientes le rechinaban, y solo con grandes esfuerzos lograron dominarlo. Pero en cuanto Huguenau se acercó a su camilla, se tranquilizó de inmediato. Cogió otra vez a Huguenau por un dedo, con lo que le obligó a caminar al lado de la camilla, y solo se dejó visitar en presencia de Huguenau.

Kuhlenbeck enseguida dio por terminado su examen:

—Esto no sirve de nada… Le pondremos una inyección y habrá que sacarlo inmediatamente de aquí… De todos modos, nos evacuarán… Por tanto, hay que llevarlo cuanto antes a Colonia… pero ¿cómo…? Aquí no puedo prescindir de nadie, la orden de evacuación puede llegar de un momento a otro…

—Tal vez yo podría transportar al mayor a Colonia… — se ofreció Huguenau—, en calidad de, diría yo si se me permite expresarlo así, enfermero voluntario… Los señores comprobarán que el mayor está satisfecho de mis cuidados.

—¿En el tren de primera hora de la tarde? —reflexionó Kuhlenbeck—. No, hoy por hoy, eso no resulta demasiado seguro.

Flurschütz tuvo una idea:

—Hoy saldrá algún camión para Colonia… ¿no podría arreglarse de alguna forma?

—Hoy todo es posible —dijo Kuhlenbeck.

—Entonces, puedo solicitar sin duda una orden de traslado a Colonia —dijo Huguenau.

Y así fue como Huguenau, provisto de documentación militar auténtica, con un brazal de la Cruz Roja en la manga, brazal que consiguió de la enfermera Mathilde, recibió la custodia oficial del mayor y lo llevó a Colonia. Colocaron la camilla en el camión, Huguenau se sentó a su lado sobre su maletín, el mayor le cogió de una mano y ya no le soltó. Más tarde, también a Huguenau le venció el cansancio. Se acomodó como pudo junto a la camilla, se puso el maletín por almohada y los dos, muy juntos y cogidos de la mano, se durmieron como buenos amigos. Y así llegaron a Colonia.

Cumpliendo las órdenes recibidas, Huguenau dejó al mayor en el hospital, aguardó pacientemente junto a su cama a que le pusieran una inyección que le evitara el riesgo de una nueva crisis y luego pudo marcharse. En la comandancia junto al hospital se procuró un billete militar para Colmar, su patria chica. Al día siguiente, retiró del banco el resto del dinero de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris* y, unos días más tarde, salió de viaje. Su odisea guerrera, aquella época de hermosas vacaciones, había terminado. Era el 5 de noviembre.

LXXXVI

Historia de la muchacha salutista de Berlín 16

¿Quién más dichoso que un enfermo? Nada le obliga a tomar parte en la lucha por la vida e, incluso, tiene libertad para morirse. No está obligado a sacar conclusiones de lo sucedido durante el día a fin de adaptar a ellas su comportamiento, tiene derecho a proseguir sus elucubraciones; encerrado en la autonomía de sus pensamientos, puede pensar deductivamente, puede pensar teológicamente. ¿Quién más dichoso que aquel que tiene derecho a pensar en sus propias creencias? A veces salgo solo a dar una vuelta, con las manos en los bolsillos, y observo los rostros de los transeúntes. Son rostros finitos; no obstante, con frecuencia, en realidad casi siempre, logro descubrir el infinito detrás de esos rostros. Estas son, en cierto modo, mis escapadas inductivas. El hecho de que en estas incursiones, que por lo demás no me llevan muy lejos —solo en una ocasión he llegado hasta Schöneberg, pero me fatigué mucho—, no haya encontrado jamás a Marie, de que nunca haya surgido su rostro entre tantos rostros, de que haya desaparecido totalmente de mi vista, apenas me causa decepción, porque ella siempre creyó que la enviarían a alguna misión lejos y sin duda así habrá ocurrido. Me siento igualmente dichoso sin ella.

Los días se habían acortado. Y como la corriente eléctrica es cara y un hombre encerrado en su propia autonomía elucubradora puede prescindir de esa luz, mis noches son largas. Nuchem viene con frecuencia a mi casa. Se sienta en la oscuridad y habla poco. Sin duda piensa en Marie, pero nunca la ha nombrado.

Una vez dijo:

—Ahora terminará la guerra.

—¿Sí? —dije yo.

—Ahora empezará la revolución —prosiguió.

Tuve la esperanza de herirle en lo vivo:

—Entonces la religión será abolida.

Le oí reír silenciosamente en la oscuridad:

—¿Eso dicen sus libros?

—Hegel dice: «Es el amor infinito el que ha hecho que Dios se identifique con lo que le es extraño para matarlo». Eso dice Hegel… y luego vendrá la religión absoluta.

Volvió a reírse; era una ligera sombra en la oscuridad:

—La Ley permanece —dijo.

Su testarudez era inquebrantable.

—Sí, sí, ya lo sé —dije—, es usted el judío errante.

Él dijo en voz baja:

—Ahora, iremos a Jerusalén.

De cualquier modo yo había hablado demasiado, así que me conformé con lo dicho y no seguí adelante.

LXXXVII

La ancha quilla del navío, del navío silencioso que jamás se acerca a tierra,
cava surcos muy profundos en las olas de la niebla,
olas planas y sin costas, que se rompen donde yace la infinita lejanía.
¡Mar del sueño, cuyas olas nos estrellan en la nada!
¡Sueño atestado de carga, carga ciega! ¡Sueño lleno de manantiales desnudos!
¡Sueño que en aquel navío sigue las huellas del Otro!
¡Oh, deseos espantosos! Bajo el peso del castigo de la Ley más espantoso
todavía, ley en la que rompen mudos y sin costas:
nunca alguno de mis sueños, nunca jamás se ha encontrado con un sueño de los tuyos.
Solitaria es la noche, aunque en las profundidades
de tu aliento se recoja, exhalando todas nuestras esperanzas
de que un día transfigurados en seres superiores accedamos
a las gradas luminosas de la Gracia, accedamos sin matarnos.

LXXXVIII

Degradación de los valores 10

EPÍLOGO

Todo estaba bien.

Y Huguenau, provisto de documentación militar auténtica, regresó gratis a Colmar, su patria chica.

¿Había cometido un asesinato? ¿Había perpetrado un acto revolucionario? No tenía por qué pensar en ello y, por otra parte, tampoco lo hacía. Pero de haberlo hecho, solo hubiera podido decir que su forma de actuar fue razonable y que cualquiera de las personalidades del lugar, entre las que, en justicia, podía contarse él, habría hecho lo mismo. Porque el límite entre lo razonable y lo irrazonable, entre realidad e irrealidad, era un límite preciso y, a lo sumo, Huguenau habría admitido que, en tiempos menos belicosos y revolucionarios, habría prescindido de aquel acto, lo cual hubiera sido desde luego una lástima. Y, sin duda, habría añadido meditabundo: «Cada cosa a su tiempo». Pero no llegó a ese extremo, porque nunca pensó en lo que había hecho y nunca lo recordaría.

Huguenau no pensaba en aquel acto ni, mucho menos aún, era consciente de la dosis de irracionalidad que encerraba su forma de actuar, tanta que incluso hubiera podido hablarse de un afloramiento de lo irracional. El ser humano ignora siempre la irracionalidad que constituye la esencia de sus actos silenciosos, nada sabe de «la invasión de los de abajo» a que está expuesto, y no puede saber nada de todo ello porque su vida se halla en todo momento dentro de un sistema de valores. Pero este sistema de valores solo sirve para encubrir y dominar lo irracional que forma el soporte de la vida empírica, atada a la tierra: hablando en términos kantianos, no solo lo consciente sino también lo irracional es un vehículo que acompaña todas las categorías; es lo absoluto de la vida que, con todos sus instintos, voliciones y emociones marcha, codo con codo, junto a lo absoluto del pensamiento. Y no solo el propio sistema de valores se basa en el acto espontáneo de la posición de valores, que es un acto irracional, sino que el sentimiento del mundo, que se halla tras todo sistema de valores, queda sustraído, tanto en su origen como en su esencia, a toda evidencia racional. Y el poderoso aparato de la plausibilidad que, según la teoría del conocimiento, se construye en torno a los hechos materiales, tiene la misma función que el aparato, no menos poderoso, de la plausibilidad ética en el que se mueve la actuación humana; son puentes de lo racional que se tienden y se superponen para servir a un único fin: conducir al ente terrenal desde su irracionalidad ineludible, desde su «maldad», hacia un sentido «racional» superior y hacia el valor propiamente metafísico en cuya estructura deductiva puede el hombre designar el lugar que les corresponde al mundo, a las cosas y a sus propias acciones, y puede, al mismo tiempo, encontrarse a sí mismo, de tal modo que su mirada no sufra error ni desorientación. No es de extrañar, pues, que en tales circunstancias Huguenau ignorara por completo su propia irracionalidad.

Todo sistema de valores procede de tendencias irracionales y la tarea de refundir la percepción irracional del mundo, sin valor ético, para darle una forma racional absoluta, tarea esta específica y radical correspondiente a la «formación», se convierte en meta ética para todo sistema de valores ultrapersonal. Y todo sistema de valores fracasa ante esta tarea. Porque el método de lo racional es siempre y solo el del acercamiento; es un método de circunvalación que intenta alcanzar lo irracional valiéndose, eso sí, de círculos cada vez más pequeños, pero sin alcanzarlo nunca, se manifieste como se manifieste: ya sea como irracionalidad de sensaciones internas, ya como inconsciencia de esta vida y de sus vivencias, ya como irracionalidad de lo que sucede en el mundo y de la infinita complejidad de las figuras del mundo; lo racional solo puede atomizar. Y el dicho popular que reza «un hombre sin sentimientos no es un hombre» es una afirmación que implica el conocimiento de la subsistencia de un fondo irracional insoluble, fondo sin el cual no puede haber ningún sistema de valores y, gracias al cual, lo irracional queda preservado de una autonomía verdaderamente corrosiva, de una «ultrarracionalidad» que, desde el punto de vista de un sistema, resulta éticamente más condenable aún, más «perversa», más «pecadora» que lo irracional: es la pura razón dialéctica y deductiva, que ha adquirido autonomía y que, en contraposición a lo irracional, susceptible de recibir una forma, no admite posibilidad ninguna de formación y que, aboliendo con su rigidez su propia forma, choca contra el límite de la infinitud lógica; la razón, al adquirir plena autonomía, es radicalmente perversa, suprime la lógica del sistema y, con ello, al sistema mismo; es el artífice de su degradación y de su disolución definitiva.

Para todo sistema de valores existe un punto del camino en que la compenetración de lo racional y de lo irracional alcanza su punto máximo, se llega a un estado de saturación y equilibrio, punto en el que la perversidad de ambos factores se vuelve inoperante, invisible e inofensiva: ¡son épocas de culminación de estilo pleno! Porque el estilo de una época podría casi definirse por esa compenetración mutua: por muy numerosos que sean los poros a través de los cuales lo racional penetre en la vida, cuando se alcanza el punto máximo lo racional se halla sometido a la vida y a la voluntad central de valores; y, por muy numerosas que sean las arterias por las que fluya lo irracional, lo irracional está, por así decirlo, canalizado, incluso en sus más finas ramificaciones, y está destinado al servicio y al impulso de la voluntad central de valores; lo irracional en sí y lo racional en sí no tienen estilo o, dicho más exactamente, están exentos de estilo; aquel por la libertad de estilo de la naturaleza y este por la libertad

de estilo de la ciencia matemática, pero dentro de su unión, dentro de su mutua sujeción, dentro de esta vida racional sometida a lo irracional, ahí es donde aparece aquel fenómeno que puede designarse con toda propiedad como estilo de un sistema de valores.

Pero dicho estado de equilibrio no es perdurable, es siempre un estado transitorio; la lógica de los hechos arrastra lo racional hacia lo ultrarracional, empuja lo ultrarracional hasta sus límites de infinito, prepara el proceso de la desintegración de valores, la dilución del sistema global en creaciones parciales y, al final de semejante proceso, junto a una razón autónoma liberada aparece una vida irracional liberada y autónoma. Evidentemente, la razón penetra también en los sistemas parciales y los conduce a su propio desarrollo autónomo, pero la amplitud de desarrollo de la razón en el seno de un sistema parcial queda delimitada por los correspondientes ámbitos concretos. Así pues, existe una manera de pensar comercial o una manera de pensar militar específicas, maneras que, cada una por su parte, tienden a alcanzar un absoluto sin compromisos y consecuente, y a formar cada una de ellas el correspondiente esquema deductivo de plausibilidad (cada una con su «teología», su «teología particular», si es que puede llamarse de este modo); y en la misma medida exacta en que, como teología militar o comercial, ejerce su influencia para construir un *organon* minimizado y ligado a lo concreto, en la misma medida también las irracionalidades permanecen ligadas en el interior de sus ámbitos parciales; pues también los ámbitos parciales son un reflejo del Yo y del sistema global y también ellos se hallan en estado de equilibrio o tienden a conseguirlo, de forma que precisamente en el anhelo de dicho equilibrio puede hablarse de un estilo de vida militar o comercial. No obstante, cuanto más pequeño va haciéndose el sistema, tanto menor va siendo su capacidad ética de expansión, tanto menor va siendo su voluntad ética, más muda e indiferente se torna frente a la maldad, frente a lo ultrarracional y frente a lo irracional que todavía late en ella; el número de fuerzas entrelazadas es cada vez menor y, en cambio, aumentan aquellas ante las cuales la voluntad ética es indiferente y a las que juzga como «asunto privado» del individuo: cuanto más progresa la dislocación del sistema global, más liberada queda la razón del mundo, más visible y operante es lo irracional. El sistema global de la religión convierte en racional el mundo por ella dominado; la liberación de la razón debe, pues, dejar igualmente libre todo el mutismo de lo irracional.

La última unidad de dislocación, dentro de la desintegración de los valores, es el individuo humano. Y cuanto menos dicho individuo intervenga en un sistema que lo supere —un sistema supraordenado— y más se limite a su propia autonomía empírica —heredero en esto del Renacimiento y del individualismo ya entonces iniciado—, tanto más insignificante y modesta será su «teología personal», tanto más incapaz será esta de abarcar los valores —sean cuales fueren— que se hallan fuera de su ámbito individual más estrecho: aquello que sucede fuera de su estrecho círculo de valores solo puede ser aceptado como materia bruta, sin forma; en una palabra, solo puede ser aceptado dogmáticamente. Surge entonces el juego vacío y dogmático de los convencionalismos, o sea, de las ultrarracionalidades de pequeñísimas dimensiones, típicas del ser humano de miras estrechas (nadie le negará este calificativo a Huguenau); surge entonces la interinfluencia mutua y no conflictiva entre una vitalidad prisionera de lo irracional y una ultrarracionalidad puesta, en una marcha fantasmagórica, vacía y muerta, al servicio de lo irracional, unidos ambos elementos, carentes de estilo e incontrolados, en una disparidad que ya no es capaz de formar valor alguno. El hombre que, apartado de todo sistema de valores, se ha convertido en el portador exclusivo de un valor individual, el hombre metafísicamente «excluido», excluido porque su lazo de unión con los individuos se ha disuelto y esfumado, ese hombre carece de valores, carece de estilo y solo se halla determinado por lo irracional.

Huguenau, hombre carente de valores, pertenecía de todos modos al sistema comercial. Era hombre que gozaba de buena reputación entre los círculos de su especialidad; era un comerciante consciente y avisado, y siempre había cumplido sus deberes comerciales rotunda y radicalmente. El hecho de haber matado a Esch no entraba desde luego en el círculo de sus obligaciones como comerciante, pero tampoco contradecía de ningún modo los usos y costumbres del comercio. Había sido una especie de acción marginal, adecuada a una época en la que el sistema de valores del comercio también había sido abolido y solo quedaba el sistema individual de valores. En cambio, estaba en la trayectoria ética comercial —a la que Huguenau había regresado—, el que, teniendo en cuenta la inmensurable devaluación sufrida por el marco a raíz de firmarse la paz, hubiera dirigido a la señora Gertrude Esch el siguiente escrito.

Distinguida señora:

Esperando que al recibo de la presente se halle usted en perfecto estado de salud, y satisfecho de poder comunicarle que lo mismo me sucede a mí, me permito recordarle amistosamente que yo, según el contrato del 14 de mayo de 1918, soy poseedor del noventa por ciento de los intereses de *El Mensajero del Electorado de Tréveris*. Para evitar malentendidos, hago constar en el presente escrito que un tercio de dicho noventa por ciento, es decir, un treinta por ciento, se halla en posesión de distintos caballeros de esa ciudad, a los cuales, no obstante, yo represento como director delegado, de modo que, sin mi autorización y consentimiento, no puede llevarse a cabo ninguna actividad comercial ni negocio alguno. En caso de producirse alguna irregularidad, me veré obligado a hacerla responsable a usted o, llegado el caso, a mis coaccionistas, de los daños y perjuicios que pudieran desprenderse de dicha eventualidad. Si usted o mis distinguidos asociados se han hecho cargo de la empresa, le ruego encarecidamente que, ante todo, me remita un estado de cuentas y me gire la parte de los

beneficios correspondientes a mi grupo, o sea, al sesenta por ciento (véase párrafo § 3 del mencionado contrato), y ello sin perjuicio de cualquier otra diligencia jurídica de la que para más adelante me reservo informarla.

Amparándome en la legalidad de usted conocida, hago constar, por otra parte, que, debido al final de la guerra, lo que es caso de fuerza mayor, me resulta imposible, tanto a mí como a mi grupo, pagar a la empresa, según lo estipulado, los dos plazos restantes, que ascienden a un total de 13.400 marcos, de los que a usted, como heredera del difunto señor August Esch, le corresponden 8.000. Asimismo, y también desde el punto de vista legal, hago constar que, habiendo olvidado reclamar en su día mediante la correspondiente notificación al periódico y a mí, como director del mismo, el pago de estos plazos, caso de que usted hubiera estado interesada en ello, aunque en la actualidad me curse dicha reclamación, yo tan solo me veré obligado a efectuar el pago mediante el abono de los intereses legales de los plazos, y así lo hago constar a fin de que nuestra situación jurídica quede clara.

Pero como a toda costa deseo evitar la intervención de la justicia en las posibles desavenencias con la muy respetada esposa de mi honorable y difunto amigo el señor August Esch (y hallándose su ciudad en territorio ocupado, yo, como ciudadano francés, tropezaría con pocas dificultades) y dado que soy amigo de solventar cuanto antes todos los asuntos, me permito proponerle, respetuosamente, la anulación de nuestro antiguo negocio, lo cual, teniendo en cuenta la situación jurídica, significaría para usted numerosas ventajas.

Esta rescisión podría hacerse del modo más sencillo revendiéndole a usted la parte del sesenta por ciento que nos corresponde a mí y a mi grupo, y estoy dispuesto a hacerlo en condiciones especialmente aceptables, ya que le ofrezco a usted dichas partes por la mitad de su precio original calculado en francos. El precio era de 13.400 marcos —unos 16.000 francos según la paridad establecida por la paz—, de modo que yo le dejaría a usted dichas partes por 8.000 francos, lo que expresado en letras es

ocho mil francos franceses

y subrayo muy en particular que, en dicha suma, no he incluido ni mis gastos ni los fondos que yo en persona aporté al negocio ni el sacrificado trabajo realizado por mí durante varios meses, pese a que el negocio vale ahora, precisamente por todo ello, mucho más que en el momento en que me hice cargo de él. Enfocando así el problema y con proporción tan moderada y favorable a sus intereses, solo pretendo facilitarle a usted la decisión de llegar a una solución adecuada, mayormente considerando que, de no disponer usted de esa suma en efectivo, podría obtenerla hipotecando sus bienes, que están libres de cargas.

Finalmente y con todo respeto me permito hacerle observar que, con la recompra del sesenta por ciento unida al diez por ciento que todavía obra en su poder, tendrá usted en sus manos una aplastante mayoría del setenta por ciento, lo que le permitirá anular al grupo minoritario formado por los otros accionistas. Estoy convencido de que, dentro de muy poco, volverá usted a ser la única propietaria de una floreciente empresa cuya sección de anuncios, preciso es que lo diga, sección que me enorgullezco de haber fundado, constituye por sí sola una mina de oro, y ni que decir tiene que me pongo encantado a su disposición para todo cuanto yo pueda ayudarla, sea con mis consejos, sea con mis intervenciones.

Considerando las presentes circunstancias, reconocerá usted que le hago una oferta que va en perjuicio de mis propios intereses, y ello porque a mí me resultaría difícil llevar desde aquí la dirección del periódico. Estoy convencido de que otras personas interesadas en el asunto me ofrecerían mucho más, lo que para usted no resultaría en modo alguno agradable, por lo cual le ruego tenga a bien enviarme su amable respuesta afirmativa dentro del plazo de catorce días, ya que, de no ser así, me vería obligado a dejar este asunto en manos de mi abogado.

Con la convicción de que sabrá apreciar en lo que vale mi amistosa y conciliadora proposición, lo que nos permitirá proceder a la elaboración de un acuerdo definitivo, me permito comunicarle también que la situación comercial es en nuestra región por completo satisfactoria y que yo gozo aquí de una buena situación.

Queda de usted, respetuosamente,

WILH. HUGUENAU
de la firma André Huguenau

Certificada

Esta era un acción repugnante y abusiva, pero a Huguenau no se lo pareció; no iba contra su teología particular ni chocaba con el sistema de valores en uso y, lo que es más, los conciudadanos de Huguenau tampoco la habrían considerado repugnante, pues se trataba de una carta irreprochable, tanto desde el punto de vista comercial como desde el jurídico. Incluso la propia señora Esch encajó tal legalidad como una fatalidad, a la que se sometió de mejor grado que, por ejemplo, a una confiscación por parte de los comunistas. Desde luego, Huguenau lamentó después la excesiva moderación de sus exigencias, ¡la mitad del precio de coste!, pero nunca conviene tirar demasiado de la cuerda y, cuando le hicieron efectivos los ocho mil francos, dicha suma representó un considerable ingreso para la empresa de Colmar, pero representó también algo más: la liquidación definitiva de los asuntos relacionados con la guerra, el definitivo retorno al hogar e incluso tal vez, aunque únicamente tal vez, algo doloroso. Porque todo lo marginal había desaparecido para siempre. Y en la medida en que en el transcurso de una vida humana, con todas sus pequeñeces, puede hallarse algo digno de ser contado, en la vida de Huguenau ya no hay nada así. Se había hecho cargo del negocio paterno y continuaba imprimiéndole el mismo sentido que sus antepasados: seriedad y atención constante a los beneficios. Y como la vida de soltero no es la más adecuada para un comerciante burgués y como la tradición de su casa, de la que había surgido su propia existencia, exigía de él que se casara con una mujer animosa para por una parte engendrar hijos en ella y, por otra, emplear la dote en la consolidación de su negocio, dio los pasos necesarios a este fin. Y como en el ínterin el franco se había devaluado y los alemanes habían introducido el marco oro, resultó más que lógico y nada extraño que dirigiera sus miradas hacia la otra orilla del Rin. Y como finalmente encontró en la región de Nassau a la novia que podía aportar con creces los medios materiales correspondientes a sus

deseos y como dicha región era eminentemente protestante, tampoco es de extrañar que el amor y las ventajas de los bienes materiales movieran a un librepensador a un cambio de creencias. Y como tanto la novia como su familia eran lo bastante estúpidos como para conceder importancia a este gesto, Huguenau, por consideración a ellos, pasó a formar parte de la confesión protestante. Y si alguno de sus conciudadanos movía la cabeza dubitativo ante aquel paso, el librepensador Huguenau les hacía ver la escasa importancia de tales formalidades, y, para reforzar su punto de vista, pese a pertenecer a la confesión protestante, dio su voto al partido católico cuando, en el mismo año de 1926, dicho partido acordó una alianza electoral con los comunistas. Y como los alsacianos, al igual que la mayoría de los teutones, son extravagantes y muchos de ellos poseen también sus pequeñas chaladuras, nadie se sorprendió gran cosa ante la irregular evolución de Huguenau, pues, en realidad, tampoco resultaba tan irregular, ya que, entre sacos de café, tejidos, comer, dormir, negocios y partidas de cartas, Huguenau llevaba una vida del todo regular. Se convirtió en padre de familia, sus elásticas redondeces corporales se ablandaron y con el tiempo se ajamonaron, y sus andares decididos fueron tornándose cansinos. Era amable con sus clientes y, con sus subordinados, era un jefe severo que siempre daba ejemplo de laboriosidad. Se levantaba muy temprano, no se permitía disfrutar de vacaciones, sus distracciones eran muy austeras y, en lo que a placeres estéticos se refiere, o carecía por completo de ellos o los despreciaba: sus obligaciones apenas si le permitían dar un paseo los domingos con su mujer y sus hijos, mucho menos aún visitar un museo (por lo demás, sentía aversión por los cuadros). Comenzó a ascender por los peldaños de la dignidad ciudadana, reemprendió la senda del deber. Su vida era la misma que llevaron sus antepasados durante doscientos años y su rostro era idéntico al de ellos. Porque todos los Huguenau tenían el mismo aspecto: gordos, cebados y una gran seriedad en la cara. ¿Quién podía suponer que en uno de ellos apareciera un rasgo irónico sarcástico? Y si esto podía ser consecuencia de una mezcla de sangres o, simplemente, un capricho de la naturaleza, o la evidente culminación de la repugnancia que le aparta de sus antepasados, es difícil de precisar y, además, era un detalle al que nadie, y menos aún el propio Huguenau, concedía ninguna importancia. Porque eran muchas las cosas que, poco a poco y cada vez más, iban dejándole indiferente, y si pensaba en lo sucedido durante la guerra, sus recuerdos iban quedando reducidos a la nada. Por último, solo le quedó el recuerdo de una cifra, la cifra de 8.000 francos, en tanto que, para el comerciante Huguenau, todo lo entonces vivido se iba reduciendo a simples contornos y a las suaves tonalidades de los billetes de banco franceses que, desde entonces, centraban su atención. Por encima de todo lo ocurrido se había extendido suavemente la niebla gris de un ensueño plateado, como si un cristal ahumado lo cubriera y, al final, ya no sabía si él había vivido aquella historia o se la habían contado.

Tal vez podría aducirse que todo aquel ensombrecimiento y todo aquel olvido solo obedecían a una actitud de resignación, actitud perpetuamente condicionada al sistema de valores burgués que se había reinstaurado en el país alsaciano (y, por tanto, también en Colmar), bajo la protección de las victoriosas bayonetas francesas, en tanto que la tierra misma, acordándose de las seculares injusticias sufridas de una y de otra parte, se hallaba llena, como auténtica zona fronteriza, de espíritu revolucionario y que, también en el interior de Huguenau, anidaban toda clase de rebeldías. De todos modos, podría alegarse que, al adquirir libertad, las fuerzas irracionales no quieren adaptarse a ningún sistema de valores antiguo y que dichas fuerzas, al ser reprimidas por un poder superior, por necesidad han de crear semejante situación de apatía tanto en la sociedad como en el individuo. Y esto nos lleva a preguntarnos cuál es la suerte de las fuerzas irracionales que se han liberado en la desintegración de los valores: ¿solo son en realidad medios de combate en la lucha entre los distintos ámbitos de valor?, ¿solo son en realidad métodos de mutuo aniquilamiento?, ¿sólo son fuerzas asesinas? Cuando la desintegración de los valores alcance la última desmembración en unidades, ¿han de convertirse entonces en lucha del individuo contra el individuo, en lucha de todos contra todos? O, limitándonos al caso de Huguenau, ¿puede un sistema de valores parcial, como el comercial al que Huguenau se había reintegrado, poseer una capacidad de unificación lo bastante fuerte como para volver a reunificar en un *organon* las tendencias irracionales, sin la protección de las bayonetas y de las redes policiales, y marcar una meta a la voluntad de valores convertida también en voluntad libre?

Desde el punto de vista de la teoría del conocimiento esto es algo inadmisible. Porque, en efecto, exige aseveraciones sobre la esencia misma de lo irracional; exige, aunque solo sea por la calificación de «fuerzas», una aclaración mecanicista; exige una metafísica antropomórfica y voluntarista; exige, en suma, una interpretación a la que, por su misma naturaleza intrínseca, se opone lo irracional, pues es precisamente la vida muda e irracional la que proporciona sin duda el material para la «formación» racional de «un ámbito de valores», pero, en su primitivo estado de irracionalidad «sin forma», solo permite la constatación de su ser anónimo, pero no autoriza ningún tipo de teorización. El sistema total, ordenado en un plano superior, o sea, el sistema religioso, es del todo consciente de esta situación. La Iglesia solo conoce un sistema de valores, el suyo, porque, de acuerdo con su origen platónico, solo conoce una verdad, solo conoce un Logos: condicionada de un modo absolutamente racional, no puede tolerar lo

que va más allá de la lógica y, reprimida por principio, tiene que negar a todo lo irracional y a sus hipotéticas «cualidades» el derecho de existir, y no solo a las que afectan a la teoría del conocimiento sino también a las que atañen a lo ético; lo irracional se convierte sin más ni más en una bestialidad y todo cuanto pueda decirse de lo irracional queda limitado a la constatación de que está ahí y de que debe adscribirse a la categoría del Mal. Desde este punto de vista, lo irracional solo puede considerarse problema a propósito de la cuestión relativa a la posible existencia del Mal en el seno de un mundo creado por Dios, y la supuesta capacidad de lo irracional para constituir un sistema solo debe discutirse a propósito de las posibles formas de manifestación del Mal. Desde luego, estas son cuestiones que la Iglesia nunca ha ignorado y que jamás pudo ignorar; la existencia del Mal siempre ha formado parte de las hipótesis de la *ecclesia militans* y, cuando el proceso de la desintegración de los valores conduce dicha existencia a manifestarse de forma continua, entonces la Iglesia se ve siempre obligada a hacer responsable de dicha desintegración al Mal; en otras palabras, a aislar lo ultrarracional, donde radica la desintegración, y, separándolo de su esencia misma, incluirlo con lo irracional en la categoría del Mal. Pero como, por una parte, es propio de la Iglesia, al igual que del individuo, conocer perfectamente la «posición de posiciones» y, además, la Iglesia sabe, tal vez incluso mejor que el individuo, que la condición indispensable de toda posible vivencia viene determinada, en cualquier forma fenomenológica, por la categoría de «valor», y como, por otra parte, la Iglesia ha de considerar su propia estructura de valores como la única factible, jamás asociará al Mal irracional ningún tipo de fuerzas creadoras de sistema, sino que lo asociará siempre a la forma fenomenológica de la imitación y solo verá en el Mal la imitación de las formas de manifestación que le son propias a ella misma. Es evidente que la Iglesia no atribuirá al Mal ningún pensamiento racional, sino tan solo una forma de pensar hueca e imitativa, un pensamiento «vacío de verdad» (el Mal como ausencia de Bien), un juego de convencionalismos ultrarracional, vacío y dogmático, una «adulteración» descarriada por lo irracional, la cual, sirviendo solo a lo irracional, tergiversa la voluntad ética y la confunde con un sonsonete moral y, en última instancia, esta tergiversación, extendida a un sistema integral, llegará a elevar la maldad de la estrechez de miras hasta las proporciones gigantescas del Anticristo. Cuanto más a sus anchas se instale el Mal en el mundo, tanto más perfecta será la imitación de Cristo por parte del Anticristo y más amenazador será el sistema de valores del Anticristo, sistema que solo puede ser un sistema integral porque integral es el sistema de la Iglesia; el propio Mal resulta indivisible y homogéneo, tan indivisible y homogéneo como la verdad por él imitada y opuesta a él. Que junto a este sistema integral pierdan vitalidad los sistemas parciales, que el catolicismo asigne a la expresión más visible de la desintegración de los valores, o sea, al pensamiento protestante, un significado especial entre los fenómenos del proceso de desintegración y lo eleve a un carácter dominante, a pensamiento directivo del desarrollo de lo funesto y de lo irracional, que la Iglesia vea en él, al igual que en todos los demás sistemas parciales, únicamente caricaturas del auténtico sistema de valores, peldaños previos al amenazador sistema integral del Anticristo, son consideraciones todas ellas que no solo corresponden al punto de vista específico de la Iglesia, sino que se apoyan fundadamente en una situación objetiva, por ejemplo, en la curiosa afinidad existente entre el protestantismo y todos los demás sistemas parciales: ya sea el capitalismo, ya sea el nacionalista o cualquier otro sistema parcial, siempre puede deducirse de él un denominador común «revolucionario» y antieclesiástico con el protestantismo; es decir, desde el punto de vista del sistema eclesiástico, siempre se halla un denominador común con lo criminal, en el que se hacen visibles las fuerzas, todas irracionales y enemigas, de los valores propios de la herejía. Y aunque la Iglesia haga de vez en cuando concesiones externas y, buscando el mal menor, tolere movimientos parciales como, por ejemplo, el nacionalista (por tratarse de posturas conservadoras frente a las distorsiones radicales puramente revolucionarias), siempre decidirá la cuestión básica del destino de las fuerzas irracionales bajo el más riguroso de los prismas: o Cristo o el Anticristo; o el retorno al seno de la Iglesia o el fin del mundo con la total desintegración de los valores en la lucha de fuerzas contrarias.

Tanto si se trata de una imagen fiel como si se trata de una caricatura, todo sistema parcial, por ser un sistema de valores, imita la estructura del sistema integral y, en la medida en que las ideas de este último se basen en principios formales, no pueden sino repetirse y confirmarse en una asociación más reducida; por el contrario, las desviaciones del contenido, desviaciones necesarias porque ningún sistema puede calificarse a sí mismo de «perverso», han de explicarse por la valoración que dicho sistema hace de lo irracional. En virtud de su origen lógico, de su fundación lógica, todo sistema parcial es revolucionario. Si, por ejemplo, el sistema parcial del nacionalismo, siguiendo su propia tendencia lógica a la absolutización, construye un *organon* en cuyo centro se encuentra el Estado nacional elevado al rango de Dios, al relacionar todos los valores con la idea de Estado, al subordinar al individuo y su libertad intelectual al poder estatal, no solo adopta una postura revolucionaria, anticapitalista, sino que, con una implicación mucho más amplia, emprende un giro anticlerical y antirreligioso, giro que conduce, estricta e inequívocamente, al absoluto derrumbamiento revolucionario de los valores y, por tanto, a la abolición del propio sistema. O sea, que si el sistema parcial quiere asegurar su propia estabilidad en el proceso de la

desintegración de los valores, si quiere defenderse de su propia *ratio*, que le empuja hacia aquella dirección, tiene que refugiarse en los medios irracionales, lo que explica aquella característica duplicidad, hablando desde el punto de vista de la teoría del conocimiento, e incluso aquellas impurezas que afectan a todo sistema parcial. Asumiendo el papel del sistema integral frente a la progresiva desintegración de los valores, considerando rebelde y criminal a lo irracional, el sistema parcial se ve obligado a extraer de la masa homogénea de lo irracional y de su anónima perversidad un grupo de fuerzas irracionales «buenas», a fin de detener con ellas la temida desintegración ulterior y producir la propia legitimación mediante su estabilidad; toda «revolución parcial» (y, en este sentido, cualquier sistema parcial es una «revolución parcial») se apoya en apriorismos irracionales, en el peso de los valores del sentimiento, en la dignidad de un «espíritu irracional» que es puesto en marcha contra la razón radical de la revolución total; todo sistema parcial ha de reconocer de modo expreso un resto irracional «informal», una reserva, por así decirlo, en el seno de la corriente de la razón, a la que poder fijarse para servir de punto estable en el proceso de la desintegración de los valores.

Pues las revoluciones son insurrecciones del Mal contra el Mal, insurrección de lo irracional contra lo racional, insurrección de lo irracional —bajo la apariencia de razón liberada de sus cadenas— contra las instituciones racionales que, para mantener su estabilidad, apelan, muy satisfechas de sí mismas, al irracional valor del sentimiento que reside en ellas; las revoluciones son la lucha entre la irrealidad y la realidad, entre la violencia y la violencia; tienen que producirse cuando, al liberarse lo ultrarracional de sus cadenas, la liberación trae consigo la puesta en libertad de lo racional; cuando el aniquilamiento del sistema de valores ha alcanzado incluso a la última unidad de valor individual y todo lo irracional se desborda dentro de la libertad absoluta de valores del individuo convertido en autónomo y solitario. Es el desbordamiento de lo irracional, el desbordamiento de lo autónomo, el desbordamiento de la vida misma, y el ser humano, solitario y carente de valores, es su instrumento. Y si toda la angustia de la tierra y toda la soledad tienen que asaltar en primer lugar a los abandonados de la tierra, o sea, a los proletarios expuestos al hambre, a los soldados expuestos en las trincheras al fuego de las granadas, si estos, los «excluidos» en el auténtico sentido de la palabra, han de ser los primeros en alcanzar la libertad de los valores, también son ellos los primeros en percibir la llamada del homicidio, que con un rumor de aceros entrechocados domina el mutismo de lo irracional. Y siempre es así: el ser humano perteneciente a una asociación de valores más pequeña extermina a los hombres de la asociación mayor en vías de autodestrucción; siempre es él, el más desgraciado de los hombres, el que adopta el papel de verdugo en el proceso de desintegración de los valores; y el día en que suenan las trompetas del juicio, entonces, el hombre carente de valores se convierte en verdugo de un mundo que se ha condenado a sí mismo.

Huguenau había cometido un asesinato. Después lo olvidó, no volvió a pensar en ello, en cambio conservaba fielmente en su memoria todos y cada uno de los afortunados golpes comerciales que, a consecuencia de ello, había conseguido (¡la carta a la señora Esch!). Y esto era lógico: en la vida solo perduran aquellos hechos que encajan dentro del sistema de valores propio del momento, pero Huguenau se había aclimatado de nuevo al sistema comercial. Y, precisamente por eso, es posible afirmar que, en las condiciones apropiadas y a pesar de haber heredado un floreciente negocio de familia, hubiera podido convertirse en un revolucionario tan bueno como en buen comerciante se convirtió. Pues el proletario, aun siendo agente de la revolución, no es «el revolucionario» que cree ser, el cual, por otra parte, no existe —no hay ninguna diferencia entre el pueblo que gritaba de júbilo en el acto de descuartizamiento del regicida Damiens y el pueblo que, treinta y cinco años después, se apiñaba en torno a la guillotina de Luis XVI—, es el exponente de un acontecer más grande, es el exponente del espíritu europeo sin más, aunque el hombre como individuo, con su vida y su estrechez de miras, se aferre todavía a un viejo sistema parcial, aunque, como Huguenau, desemboque en un sistema comercial, aunque se sume a una prerrevolución o a la revolución definitiva, el espíritu positivista de la abolición de los valores es el que se extiende por todo el mundo occidental, y su expresión visible no se limita en modo alguno al materialismo ruso-proletario, sino que este materialismo no es sino un matiz del pensamiento positivista en el que se ha disuelto el conjunto de la filosofía occidental, en la medida en que esta puede aún reivindicar dicho apelativo. Sí, incluso los problemas del reparto de bienes pasan a segundo término, aunque vayan desapareciendo cada vez más las diferencias entre los métodos de trabajo americanizantes y comunísticos; pasan a segundo término ante la unidad de las ideologías que, cada vez con mayor claridad, tienden hacia un punto común, hacia un fin cuyo sello político, sea este o aquel, poco importa, ya que toda su significación estriba —según la cuestión fundamental— única y exclusivamente en que se trate de un sistema integral capaz de volver a reunir las corrientes liberadoras de lo irracional. Y por ello carece asimismo de importancia el hecho de que cualquier prerrevolución «irracional» sea o no capaz de vivir, ya que, de todos modos, no ejerce ninguna influencia sobre la revolución «racional» definitiva en la que, en suma, ha de desembocar. En cambio, por su calidad de formación parcial puede mostrar —por encima de cualquier interpretación mecanicista— aquello que necesariamente ha de permanecer desconocido en el seno de las formaciones integrales: que existen fuerzas irracionales, que estas son activas y que, de

acuerdo con su entidad esencial, tienden a unirse en un nuevo *organon* de valores, en un sistema integral que, desde el punto de vista de la Iglesia, no será sino el Anticristo. No se trata aquí de síntomas subordinados —como el celo antiplatónico de los comunistas o como la propaganda marxista de la época del racionalismo ilustrado o como la propaganda burguesa de asociaciones de librepensadores—, o sea, de un ateísmo que, con toda su pecaminosidad, es demasiado insignificante para la Iglesia, demasiado digno de compasión como para englobarlo con la perversidad del Anticristo; se trata del espíritu europeo, del espíritu «herético» de lo inmediato y del positivismo, de modo que, en este sentido más general, incluso carece de importancia el que a través de Fichte, la ideología protestante se haya infiltrado en la revolución nacionalista o el que, a través de Hegel, se haya infiltrado (desde luego más claramente) en el comunismo marxista. Y aunque la Iglesia, con su infalible instinto del odio, con su odio por la herejía, trate de descubrir al protestantismo incluso en sus derivaciones más remotas (y precisamente por ello persigue con una incomprensible intransigencia al comunismo, cuyos postulados, derivados del primitivo cristianismo, podría adoptar a la perfección), todavía no ha apreciado en la manifestación concreta del comunismo la concretización del Anticristo, sino tan solo un preludio. Y aunque la teología protestante del kantismo se despliegue en una auténtica teología «marxista», provista de una rígida interpretación de la ley, con una ontología inamovible y una ética inquebrantable, provista pues de todos los componentes de una auténtica teología y presentando en su totalidad la Iglesia visible de esta teología; y aunque esta iglesia, plenamente consciente, se establezca como antiiglesia elevando las máquinas a objetos de culto, haciendo sacerdotes de los ingenieros y de los demagogos, esto no constituye aún el sistema integral en sí, no es todavía el Anticristo; ¡pero es el camino que lleva a él y también es una señal de la destrucción de la imagen cristiano-platónica del mundo! Y en toda esta dogmática, en toda esta estructura de la antiiglesia marxista, con su concepto ascético y duro del Estado, se perfila con toda claridad, y para el catolicismo más claramente que para nadie, se perfila, pues, la poderosa silueta de un espíritu que va más allá del marxismo, más allá de toda deificación del Estado, y que, adopte la forma que adopte, deja tras de sí y tan lejos todo lo revolucionario que incluso la vía marxista parece un desvío: es el perfil de una «iglesia en sí» carente de iglesia, la ontología exenta de sustancialidad y una «ciencia de la naturaleza en sí», una «ética en sí» exenta de dogmas; en suma, es un *organon* de aquella abstracción última, lógica y sin ornamentos, que debe conseguirse trasladando hasta el infinito el punto de plausibilidad y en la que se manifiesta todo el radicalismo del espíritu protestante; es la doble afirmación positivista de las cosas del mundo y de la rigurosa ascética del deber, tal y como la entendían ya Lutero y todo el Renacimiento, y que, cumpliendo con su idea innata y necesaria, tiende hacia una nueva unidad del pensamiento y del ser, una nueva unidad del infinito ético y material. Es la unidad que constituye la esencia de todas las teologías y debe necesariamente subsistir aunque se intente extirpar del mundo el pensamiento, pero también podrá subsistir si el punto de plausibilidad científica de la «consideración de lo verdadero» coincide con el punto de plausibilidad de la «fe» y la doble verdad se convierte de nuevo en una verdad sin equívoco. Porque al final de la infinita cadena de cuestiones que conduce a dicha plausibilidad se yergue el hecho puro, la idea de un *organon* de deberes puros, la idea de una fe racional, exenta de Dios; en el extremo de la cadena se halla, edificada por leyes rígidas como la piedra, la forma vacía de contenido de una «religión en sí», e incluso tal vez lo inmediato racional de una «mística en sí», cuya religiosidad muda, ascética y sin ornamentos señala ya la meta final de esta revolución verdaderamente protestante: el vacío sordo de una absolutidad cruel en el que impera el espíritu abstracto de Dios, el espíritu de Dios, no Dios mismo, y, no obstante, Él reinando lleno de dolor en la angustia del mutismo sin sueños e inviolable, que es el Logos puro.

Huguenau apenas participaba de esta situación del espíritu europeo, en cambio sí participaba de la inseguridad reinante. Pues lo que de irracional hay en el hombre intuye lo irracional del mundo y aunque la inseguridad del mundo es, por así decirlo, una inseguridad racional, con frecuencia incluso una inseguridad comercial, ha surgido sin embargo de la liberación de la razón, la cual tiende al infinito en cada uno de los ámbitos de valores y, aboliéndose a sí misma en la frontera ultrarracional del infinito, se vuelve súbitamente hacia lo irracional y hacia lo «nunca más aprehensible». El dinero y la técnica se han vuelto incontrolables, los sistemas monetarios oscilan; a despecho de todas las explicaciones que el hombre tiene en su mano para lo irracional, lo finito no puede seguir a lo infinito y no existe ningún medio racional de reconducir la inseguridad irracional del infinito hacia lo racional y lo controlable.

Se diría que el infinito ha despertado a una vida autónoma y concreta, arrastrado y absorbido por lo Absoluto, por lo Absoluto que, en la hora entre derrumbamiento y ascensión, en esa hora mágica de la muerte y de la concepción, fulgura en el más remoto horizonte. Y aunque Huguenau deseara apartar sus ojos del resplandor del cielo crepuscular, y no quisiera saber nada de dichas posibilidades, sentía, no obstante el aliento helado que, soplando por encima del mundo, lo paraliza y lo deja rígido y que, además, roba su sentido a las cosas de este mundo. Y cuando Huguenau, cada mañana, seguía en su periódico los acontecimientos del mundo, lo hacía con el malestar de todos los lectores de periódicos, que se precipitan ansiosos sobre las noticias, hambrientos de hechos, especialmente de aquellos hechos adornados con

ilustraciones, y que esperan, cada día, que de nuevo la masa de los hechos colme el vacío de un mundo que ha enmudecido, el vacío de un alma que ha enmudecido. Leen sus periódicos y sienten la angustia del ser humano que todas las mañanas despierta en la soledad, pues el lenguaje de la vieja comunidad ha enmudecido para ellos y el nuevo no llega a sus oídos. Por mucho que, criticando con dureza las instituciones políticas y públicas o las jurídicas, aparenten compresión y claridad de visión, por más que, a lo largo del día, intercambien sus respectivos puntos de vista sobre dichos temas, se quedan a medio camino entre lo que todavía no es y lo que ya no será. Ellos no confían en la palabra, quieren verla plasmada en imágenes, ni siquiera pueden creer ya en la mesura de su propio lenguaje y, emplazados entre el fin y el principio, tan solo saben que la lógica de los hechos es irresistible, que la ley permanece intangible: no existe alma que, por muy depravada, por muy vil, por muy estrecha de miras que sea o por muy entregada que esté al dogma más ruin, pueda sustraerse a esta visión de las cosas y a esta angustia. El ser humano, semejante a un niño sorprendido y asaltado por la soledad, presa de la angustia de la criatura que ha empezado a morir, ha de buscar en lo finito el vado que constituirá su vida y su seguridad. No encuentra estabilidad en ninguna parte. Y de nada sirve que se esfuerce, una y otra vez, en hallar salvación dentro de un sistema parcial, tanto si lo hace porque, al abrigo de las viejas formas románticas, espera hallar protección para la inseguridad, como si lo hace porque confía en que, dentro de una revolución parcial, lo conocido y lo familiar vayan deslizándose poco a poco y en cierta manera sin dolor en lo inexorablemente desconocido. No encuentra estabilidad porque se ha extraviado en la embriaguez de una falsa comunidad, y la secreta y más profunda atadura, que él persigue con ahínco, se deshace en la mano que cree haber atrapado los hilos; y si, por último, el hombre decepcionado se refugia en el sistema financiero-comercial, tampoco escapa a la decepción. Incluso esta forma de existencia, la más propia de la burguesía estrecha de miras, siendo más resistente que todos los demás sistemas parciales, porque promete la sólida unidad del mundo necesaria al hombre para escapar a la inseguridad —dos monedas de un marco son más que un marco solo, y una suma de 8.000 francos se compone de muchos francos, todo y con ser un total, un *organon* racional en el que la cuenta del mundo halla su valor exacto—, incluso esta forma de existencia, en la que el burgués quisiera creer a pesar de las fluctuaciones de los valores monetarios, por muy resistente que sea, se desvanece también; lo irracional no puede ser encauzado en ninguna parte y ninguna figura del mundo puede representarse ya como una suma de columnas de cifras racionales. Y cuando, alcanzadas todas las dignidades ciudadanas, el comerciante Huguenau, hombre que, en todos los órdenes de la vida, solía preocuparse antes que nada por el precio y por las posibles ganancias, cuando este Huguenau también consideraba racional que, en tales tiempos de inseguridad financiera, se demostrara una desconfianza cada vez mayor, podía suceder que sin embargo él, con expresión irónica o con un despectivo gesto de mano, intentara deshacerse de algo sobre cuya procedencia —cosa sorprendente— no podía justificarse ante sí mismo, o que, quedándose de pronto perplejo, preguntara «¿Qué es el dinero?». También podía suceder que, tras haber examinado atenta y desconfiadamente a un cliente, le retirara de pronto el crédito, sin más explicación, simplemente porque, de pronto, el hombre ya no le gustaba, o porque le repugnaba un gesto sarcástico o cualquier otro gesto que hiciera con la boca; si tal medida resultaba favorable o no, si con ella se deshacía a tiempo de un cliente moroso o si, por el contrario, echaba en brazos de la competencia un cliente solvente, era, en cualquier caso, y dejando de lado todas las consecuencias de orden práctico, un método rudo, un método que, probablemente lúcido, se desarrollaba en cierto modo por cortocircuito, aunque desde luego fuera desacostumbrado en la vida comercial y, con toda seguridad, un método irracional. Y desde luego no era esta la menor de las causas de que, de un modo imperceptible, fuera abriéndose en torno a Huguenau un abismo, una zona muerta y silenciosa que le separaba de sus conciudadanos. Todo esto que, en realidad, no era sino una remota sospecha, tomaba cuerpo y se hacía casi tangible en cuanto Huguenau se hallaba rodeado de una concurrencia numerosa: en un cine, en un local donde la juventud bailase o en las fiestas que conmemoraban la victoria francesa. Entonces él, que tal vez un día llegaría a ocupar el sillón de alcalde, podía permanecer sentado y en silencio ante la florida mesa entre las demás personalidades del lugar y, a través de los gruesos cristales de sus gafas, podía contemplar, con seria mirada de muchacho, a los que bailaban; y aunque no había alcanzado, ni mucho menos, aquella edad en que debe renunciarse al placer del baile, apenas daba crédito a sus propios recuerdos cuando susurraba a su vecino (jamás dejaba de hacerlo) que, años atrás, él también había sido un consumado bailarín. Porque, tanto si se quedaba mucho tiempo en uno de aquellos locales donde se celebraban reuniones patrióticas, como si los domingos salía, con su hijo mayor, hasta la avenida Strassburg para presenciar la salida de una prueba ciclista —y también cuando acudía a esta o aquella reunión social, a fin de tener en realidad una prueba concreta de lo que sentía—, caía inevitablemente en aquel extraño desasosiego en el que las cosas se desplazaban de una manera imperceptible y en el que toda ceremonia, a la que sin embargo debería sumarse un concepto de indivisible, comenzaba a descomponerse en una inquietante falta de unidad, en algo que, a despecho de sus propias convicciones, alguien había amalgamado y atado, mediante decoraciones, banderas y guirnaldas, de forma que resultaba antinatural. Y de no haber estado atemorizado por tan desencaminados

pensamientos, Huguenau habría descubierto sin duda que no existe ningún concepto ni ningún nombre a los que corresponda un sustrato concreto; con toda seguridad habría descubierto que han de existir símbolos ocultos, aunque visibles, que garanticen la unidad del acontecer y de la cohesión del mundo, símbolos cuya existencia es necesaria porque, de lo contrario, todo lo visible se desmoronaría en un agregado indecible, ingrávido y seco, compuesto de ceniza fría y transparente. Huguenau había sentido la maldición de lo fortuito y de lo amontonado que se extiende sobre las cosas y por encima del ensamblaje de las cosas, de modo que resulta imposible imaginar ningún tipo de ordenación que no sea también fortuita y arbitraria: ¿No deberían dispersarse inmediatamente a los cuatro vientos todos aquellos ciclistas, si no los mantuviera unidos la misma camiseta y el mismo distintivo del club? Huguenau no se planteaba esta cuestión porque dicha cuestión superaba los límites de lo que, con cierta justicia, pudiera llamarse su teología particular; no obstante, esta cuestión no formulada le irritaba tanto como la invisibilidad de todas las instancias de las que él dependía, y esta irritabilidad podría descargarse, por ejemplo, por medio de un injustificado bofetón propinado a su hijo durante el camino de regreso. Relajado entonces por este procedimiento, solía volver a la sólida realidad, confirmando así el pensamiento hegeliano que dice: «La voluntad realmente libre es la unidad entre el espíritu teórico y el práctico». Ya de buen humor, volvía a la ciudad caminando erguido. Al pasar ante los diferentes locales de culto, de los que precisamente salía la gente en grupos, seguía adelante canturreando alegremente, marcando incluso el compás con el bastón y, cada vez que alguien le saludaba, se cuadraba y decía «¡Salud!».

Porque siempre y para todos lo que importa es la relación con la libertad, e incluso la teología más diminuta y estrecha —cuyo alcance llega justo a plausibilizar las acciones más estrábicas de un Yo empírico, o sea, incluso la teología particular de un Huguenau— sirve a la libertad, incluso para ella la libertad es el centro en sí, el centro propiamente místico de deducción (y esto es aplicable a Huguenau, al menos a partir del día en que, al rayar el alba, abandonó la trinchera y llevó a cabo una acción, irracional en apariencia, pero muy racional, en servicio de la libertad, de modo que, a partir de aquel día, todo cuanto intentó y todo cuanto intentará todavía en su vida se presenta como una repetición de aquella primera acción solemne y de día de fiesta). Sí, casi parece como si la libertad oscilara por encima de todo lo racional como una categoría especial y sublime, como un fin y un principio, semejante a lo Absoluto, a cuyo lado resplandece y al que sin embargo supera en resplandor, último y suave rayo de los abismos de fuego del cielo rasgado. Lo irracional jamás podría fusionarse con lo racional, lo racional no podría volver a disolverse en la armonía del sentimiento vivo, si ambos no formaran parte de un ser superior a ellos, que impone respeto, que es al mismo tiempo la más alta realidad y la más profunda irrealidad: solo en esta solidaridad de realidad e irrealidad podrá efectuarse la totalidad del mundo y su configuración; eterna renovación de lo humano se justifica en la idea de libertad, pues, inasequible en lo terrenal, el camino que conduce a la libertad tiene que ser siempre recorrido de nuevo. ¡Oh doloroso deber que lleva a la libertad! Terrible y eternamente renovada renovación del conocimiento en la que se justifica la rebelión de lo absoluto contra lo absoluto, la rebelión de la vida contra la razón; justificación de una razón que, renegando en apariencia de sí misma, desata lo absoluto perteneciente a lo irracional de lo absoluto perteneciente a lo racional; justificación porque también en ella se da la última garantía de que las fuerzas irracionales desatadas volverán a unirse en un sistema de valores. No hay sistema de valores que no se someta a la libertad, pues incluso el más insignificante de ellos busca la libertad. Incluso el hombre caído en las más terrenas soledad y autonomía, aquel que no va más allá de la libertad del asesinato, de la libertad de la cárcel y, en el mejor de los casos, de la libertad del desertor, incluso ese hombre, desprovisto de valores y sobre el que pesa el imperativo de todo lo terrenal, está a merced del hálito del Eterno, y no existe nadie para quien la divina señal de la libertad no haya brillado por lo menos una vez en la noche de su soledad. Cada uno ha de realizar sus sueños, ya sea malvada o santamente, y tiene que realizarlos para participar de la libertad en su vida oscura y de apatía. Y así era como Huguenau tenía a veces la sensación de estar sentado en una cueva o en un oscuro pozo de mina y de que, mirando hacia afuera, hacia una zona fría que, como un cinturón de soledad, rodeaba el lugar donde él se encontraba, veía la vida en lejanas imágenes contra el firmamento oscuro, y entonces sentía una gran nostalgia y anhelaba arrastrarse fuera de aquel cerco y participar, en el exterior, de una libertad y de una soledad cuya existencia intuía como una visión procedente de no importa dónde y solo a él dirigida; era como un conocimiento de la más profunda comunidad en que aquella soledad tan profunda debería al fin cambiarse. Pero ese conocimiento no iba sino hasta la confusa idea de que tal vez allí estuviera permitido obtener por la fuerza una convivencia fraternal y cordial, que se pudiera obligar a los demás, con amenazas de muerte o por la violencia o, al menos mediante unas bofetadas, a que le aceptasen y escucharan su verdad, verdad que, aunque no era capaz de enunciar, él sabía mejor que la de ellos. Pues aunque en su comportamiento y en su forma de vida apenas se diferenciara de los otros, aunque el vehículo de su vida se deslizara cada vez más seguro por las vías donde él lo había colocado ya en su juventud, vías de las que no pensaba salirse en ningún caso, o sea, aunque la suya fuera una vida carnal, una vida masiva, la que ahora rodaba al encuentro de la muerte parecía no obstante, más elevada y, en cierto modo, más diáfana, ya que cada día

que pasaba se sentía más aislado, aunque ya no sufría por ello. Separado del mundo y, no obstante, en él, veía a los demás hombres moverse hacia límites cada vez más lejanos y cada vez más anhelados, pero no hacía el menor esfuerzo por salvar aquella lejanía, y tampoco en esto se diferenciaba lo más mínimo de los demás mortales, ya que cada uno de ellos sabe que la vida del ser humano no basta para recorrer el camino que, como una espiral, asciende hacia llanuras cada vez más elevadas, camino en el que lo que fue y lo que se frustró surgen de nuevo como una meta superior para hundirse a cada paso en la niebla lejana; vía infinita del cerco cerrado y de la plenitud, lúcida realidad donde las cosas se desintegran y se separan hasta los polos y hasta los límites del mundo, donde todo lo separado vuelve a unirse de nuevo, donde la lejanía es nuevamente abolida y lo irracional adopta su figura visible, donde el temor ya no se cambia en anhelo ni el anhelo en temor, donde la libertad del Yo desemboca una vez más en la libertad platónica de Dios: vía infinita del cerrado y de la plenitud, vía solo accesible para aquel que ha realizado su ser, inaccesible para todos.

¡Inaccesible para todos! Y aun en el caso de que Huguenau hubiera ido a parar a un sistema revolucionario y no a uno comercial; la vía de la plenitud hubiera seguido para él cerrada a la transformación. Porque un asesinato es siempre un asesinato, la perversidad es siempre perversidad, y la mediocridad de un ámbito de valores limitado al individuo y a sus impulsos irracionales, producto esto último de toda desintegración de los valores, es siempre el punto de reprobación absoluto, es siempre y en cierto modo el cero absoluto invariante, común a todas las escalas de valores y a todos los sistemas de valores a pesar de su relatividad recíproca. Ese punto ha de ser común, porque no puede edificarse ningún sistema de valores que no esté sometido, en su idea y en su esencia lógica, al «condicionamiento de una posible experiencia», matiz empírico de una estructura lógica común a todos los sistemas y de una inmutabilidad a priori ligada al Logos. Y casi parece emanación de la necesidad lógica misma que el paso de un sistema de valores a otro deba hacerse por dicho cero absoluto de la atomización de los valores, que ese paso deba realizarse saltando por encima de una generación, la cual, desprovista de toda relación tanto con el antiguo sistema de valores como con el nuevo, y precisamente por esa carencia de relación, por esa indiferencia ante el dolor ajeno, indiferencia que raya la locura, por ese total desprendimiento de los valores, proporciona la legitimación ética —y con ella la legitimación histórica— a la cruel indiferencia a que se halla expuesto todo lo humano en tiempos de revolución. Y tal vez deba ser así, puesto que solo una generación con semejante mutismo absoluto es capaz de soportar la visión de lo Absoluto y el explosivo y radiante esplendor de la libertad: radiante esplendor que fulgura oscilando sobre las tinieblas más profundas y solo sobre ellas. Su reflejo en la tierra es como una imagen en un estanque oscuro, y el eco terrenal de su silencio es el entrechocar de aceros del asesinato, impenetrable resonancia del mutismo que, no obstante, se yergue como un amenazador muro de silencio alzado entre los hombres a fin de que sus voces no puedan pasar de un lado a otro y el ser humano no pueda sino estremecerse. ¡Reflejo terrible, terrible eco de la Razón que irrumpe en lo Absoluto! La imagen terrenal reflejo de su rigor se transforma en coacción y en muda violencia, y lo inmediato racional de su meta divina se transforma en lo inmediato irracional que ha sometido al hombre a una obediencia muda, en contra de su voluntad; su infinita cadena de preguntas se convierte en el único eslabón de lo irracional, que ya no pregunta, sino que tan solo actúa y provoca la desintegración de una comunidad que ya no existe porque, sin fuerzas, pero llena de mala voluntad, se anega a sí misma en sangre y se asfixia en gases venenosos. ¡Oh, qué muerte tan solitaria es el reflejo terrenal de la soledad divina! Confinado al horror de una razón libre de trabas, obligado a servirla sin comprenderla, prisionero de unos hechos que se suceden según una ordenación superior, presa de su propia irracionalidad, el hombre es semejante al salvaje que, víctima de un encantamiento, no distingue entre medio y resultado; es semejante al demente que no puede liberarse del caos que en él confunde lo irracional con lo ultrarracional; es semejante al criminal incapaz de hallar el camino que conduce a la realidad de valores de una comunidad más anhelada. Sin que pueda recuperarlo, el pasado desaparece y se esfuma, el futuro se le escapa sin posibilidad de recobrarlo y el estruendo de las máquinas no le advierte de camino alguno que conduzca a la meta donde, inasequible y sin riberas, se alza en la niebla la negra antorcha de lo Absoluto. ¡Hora terrible de la muerte y de la concepción! Hora terrible de lo Absoluto sufrida y soportada por una generación que se ha extinguido, que nada sabe del infinito al que se ve impelida por su propia lógica; sin instrucción, desamparados, absurdos, son librados al huracán glacial, para poder vivir han de olvidar y no saben por qué mueren. Su camino es el camino de Ahasverus, su deber es el deber de Ahasverus, su libertad es la libertad del acosado y su meta es el olvido. ¡Generación perdida! Inexistente como el propio Mal, sin rostro y sin historia en el antro de lo indiscernible, condenados a perderse en el tiempo, ¡sin historia en un tiempo que se eleva hasta la Historia absoluta! Sea cual sea la actitud que el individuo adopte ante los acontecimientos de la revolución, se aferre reaccionario a formas periclitadas, confundiendo lo estético con lo ético, como hacen todos los conservadurismos, o se mantenga al margen con la pasividad de un conocimiento egoísta, o, entregado a sus impulsos irracionales, se entregue al trabajo destructivo de la revolución:

sigue estando fatalmente carente de ética, excluido de su época, excluido del tiempo;

pero jamás en parte alguna el espíritu de la época es tan fuerte, tan verdaderamente ético e histórico como en la llamarada última, y primera al mismo tiempo, que es la revolución: ¡acto de autoabolición y de autorrenovación, acto último y supremo del sistema desintegrador de valores y primero del nuevo sistema, instante de la radical abolición del tiempo, creador de historia, en el pathos del cero absoluto!

Grande es la angustia del hombre que adquiere conciencia de su soledad y que huye de su propia memoria; vencido y excluido, es devuelto a la más profunda angustia del ser creado, a la angustia del que sufre y comete violencia; devuelto a una soledad ultrapoderosa, su huida, su desesperación y su letargo pueden llegar a ser tan grandes que, a la fuerza, ha de pensar en atentar contra sí mismo para escapar a la ley pétrea del acontecer. Y, atemorizado ante la voz del juicio que surge amenazadora del fondo de las tinieblas, siente despertar en él con fuerza redoblada la nostalgia de un guía que, tomándole suave y dulcemente la mano, ponga orden indicándole el camino, un guía que ya no sigue los pasos de nadie, sino que va el primero por la vía intransitada del círculo cerrado, para elevarse a planos cada vez más altos, para elevarse hacia un acercamiento cada vez más luminoso, guía que edificará de nuevo la casa a fin de que la vida vuelva a renacer de lo muerto, guía resucitado él mismo de entre los muertos, guía portador de la Salvación y que, con sus actos, dará sentido a los incomprensibles sucesos de este tiempo para que así pueda inaugurarse una nueva era. Esto solo es nostalgia. Pero aunque ese guía viniera, el ansiado milagro no se produciría; su vida sería la vida cotidiana terrenal, y al igual que la fe reposa en creer-que-es-verdad y el creer-que-es-verdad reposa en la fe de una religión eternamente racional, el guía caminará con la ropa menos llamativa de todas, y tal vez sea ese transeúnte que ahora cruza la calle, pues, camine por donde camine —el hervidero de calles de la gran ciudad, los campos bajo el resplandor del atardecer—, su camino es el camino de Sión, camino no obstante de todos nosotros, es la búsqueda del vado entre el Mal de lo irracional y el Mal de lo ultrarracional, e incluso su libertad es la dolorosa libertad del deber, es sacrificio y expiación por todo lo que ha sido. Su camino es también camino de prueba, sometido al rigorismo, y su abandono es también el abandono del niño, del hijo cuya meta desaparece en lo inasequible, porque ha sido abandonado por su padre. Y, pese a ello, la esperanza de conocer al guía es ya propio conocimiento, la intuición de la Gracia es ya Gracia y, por muy inútil que resulte nuestra esperanza de que, con la vida visible del guía, lo Absoluto adquiera un día su plenitud en lo terrenal, la meta sigue siendo eternamente aproximable; indestructible, la esperanza mesiánica de la aproximación; el alumbramiento de valores, eternamente renaciente. Y aunque estemos rodeados por el mutismo siempre creciente de lo abstracto, aunque el hombre, expulsado a la nada, expulsado de su Yo, sea presa de la más fría de las violencias, lo que azota el mundo es el aliento de lo Absoluto, y de la intuición y del presentimiento de la verdad brota la alegre y festiva seguridad que nos advierte que cada uno lleva en el fondo de su alma un pequeño resplandor y que la unidad no se pierde nunca, como no se pierde la fraternidad de las humilladas criaturas humanas, desde cuya angustia más profunda brilla, sin que pueda perderse y jamás perdida, la angustia de una gracia divina, unidad del hombre que, por encima de espacios y tiempos, brilla sobre todas las cosas; unidad que es fuente de toda luz y santificación de todo lo que vive; símbolo del símbolo, espejo del espejo, que surge de la esencia del ser sumido en las tinieblas, que brota de la locura y de la carencia de sueños como una vida maternal recibida a modo de dádiva, vida arrancada a lo desconocido y reencontrada, arquetipo de la imagen simbólica. En la sublevación de lo irracional, que borra el Yo y atraviesa sus límites, aboliendo el tiempo y la distancia, en el huracán de lo gélido, en la tormenta del derrumbamiento, todas las puertas se abren brutalmente, se hunden los cimientos de la cárcel, y de las densas tinieblas del mundo, de nuestras más amargas y densas tinieblas, una llamada llega al desamparado, suena la voz que une lo que fue con lo que todavía ha de ser, la soledad con todas las soledades, y no es la voz del miedo ni la llamada del Juicio; suena tímidamente en el silencio del Logos, pese a tener en él su soporte, alzándose por encima del ruido de la no existencia: es la voz del hombre y de los pueblos, la voz del consuelo y de la esperanza, la voz de la bondad inmediata: «¡No te hagas mal alguno, que todos estamos aquí!».

1. *El arte de la novela*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 1987.

2. «Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit», en *Dicten und Erkennen*, *Essays* I, Zurich, Rhein Verlag, 1955 («Hofmannsthal y su tiempo», en *Poesía e investigación*, Barcelona, Barral, 1974).

3. En *Hombres en tiempos de oscuridad*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1990, pág. 128.

4. Esta valoración se debe a Thomas Koebner, en su estudio introductorio a Hermann Broch, *Herman Broch: Leben und Werk*, A. Francke AG Verlag, Dalp Taschenbücher, Berna, 1965, pág. 49.

5. El investigador y crítico Paul Michael Lützeler ha de citarse aquí por su interés en el autor y sus intervenciones y colaboraciones en varios simposios. Entre otros estudios y ediciones (como la correspondencia —*Briefwechsel*— entre Hannah Arendt y Broch, Frankfurt am Main, Jüdischer Verlag, 1996), el lector español puede consultar su obra *Hermann Broch*, Valencia, Edicions Alfons el Magnànim, 1989.

1. Tribunal popular secreto de la Edad Media alemana. *(N. de la T.)*

2. *Bibel*, biblia, y *stiefel*, bota, riman en alemán. *(N. del E.)*

3. Götz von Berlinchingen, protagonista de la obra homónima de Goethe, personaje que, en el acto III, responde a un enviado que le conmina a rendirse en nombre del emperador: «¡Dile a tu capitán que puede lamerme el culo!».

Biografía

Hermann Broch (1886-1951) nació en Viena en una familia acomodada de origen judío. Cursó estudios de ingeniería textil y trabajó largo tiempo en la fábrica de su padre. En 1928 abandonó sus actividades en la industria para dedicarse por entero a la literatura y a sus estudios de filosofía, matemáticas y psicología. Perseguido por la Gestapo en 1938, logró salir de la cárcel gracias a la intervención de algunas personalidades, entre ellas James Joyce, y huir primero a Inglaterra y luego a Estados Unidos, donde falleció en la ciudad de New Haven. Aparte de una importante obra como ensayista, en el campo de la narrativa dejó varias obras capitales para la literatura contemporánea: *La muerte de Virgilio*, *Los inocentes* y la trilogía de Los sonámbulos, que, escrita entre 1931 y 1932, incluye *Pasenow o el romanticismo*, *Esch o la anarquía* y *Huguenau o el realismo*.

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